19

TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

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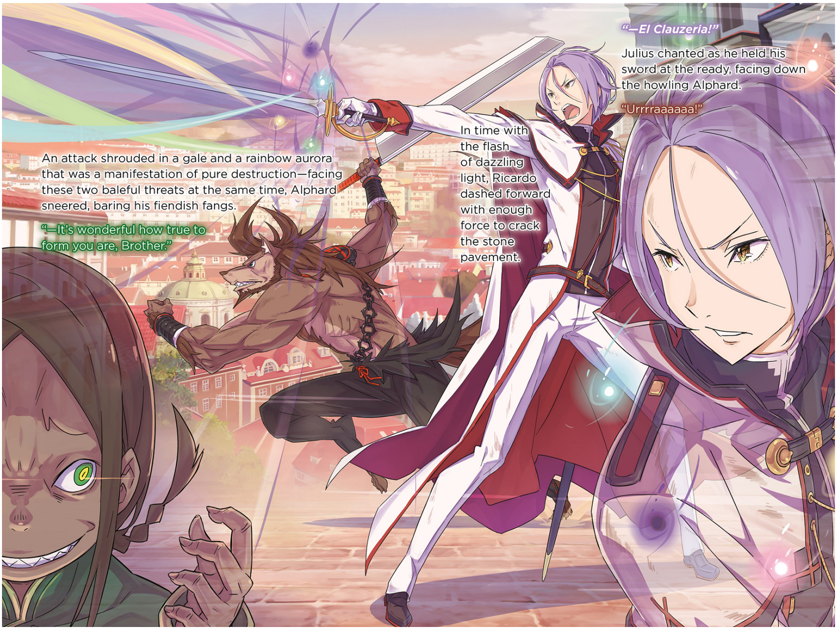


"—El Clauzeria!"

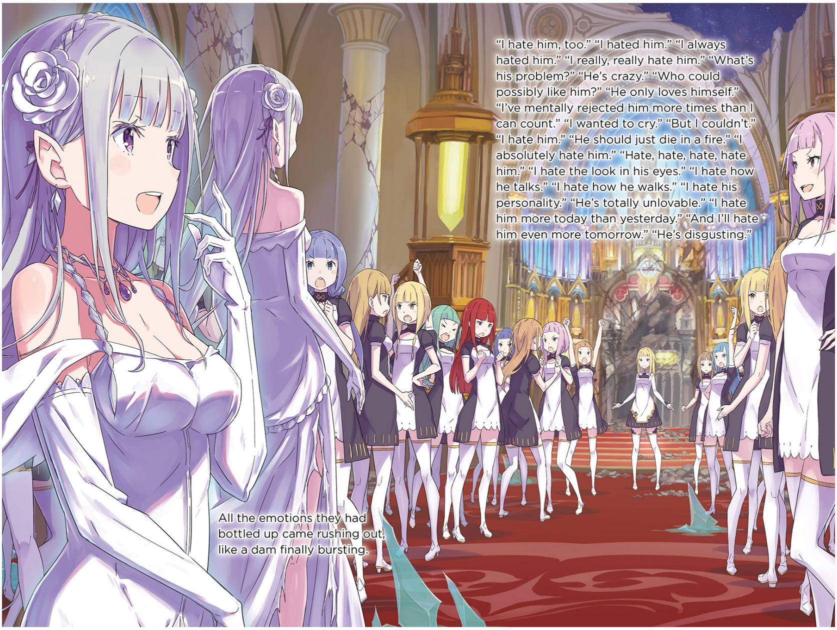
Julius chanted as he held his sword at the ready, facing down the howling Alphard.

"Urrrraaaaaa!"

In time with the flash of dazzling light, Ricardo dashed forward with enough force to crack the stone pavement.

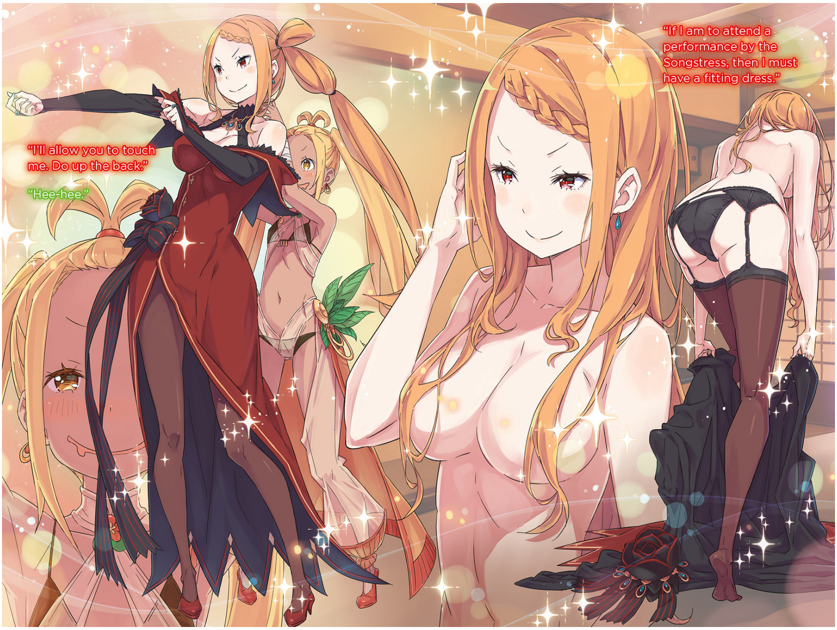
An attack shrouded in a gale and a rainbow aurora that was a manifestation of pure destruction—facing these two baleful threats at the same time, Alphard sneered, baring his fiendish fangs.

"—It's wonderful how true to form you are, Brother."



“I hate him, too.” “I hated him.” “I always hated him.” “I really, really hate him.” “What’s his problem?” “He’s crazy.” “Who could possibly like him?” “He only loves himself.” “I’ve mentally rejected him more times than I can count.” “I wanted to cry.” “But I couldn’t.” “I hate him.” “He should just die in a fire.” “I absolutely hate him.” “Hate, hate, hate, hate him.” “I hate the look in his eyes.” “I hate how he talks.” “I hate how he walks.” “I hate his personality.” “He’s totally unlovable.” “I hate him more today than yesterday.” “And I’ll hate him even more tomorrow.” “He’s disgusting.”

All the emotions they had bottled up came rushing out, like a dam finally bursting.


"If I am to attend a performance by the Songstress, then I must have a fitting dress."
"I'll allow you to touch me. Do up the back."
"Hee-hee."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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VOLUME 19

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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PROLOGUE

CITY SCRAMBLE

1

A dreadful tension filled the plaza.

The square was surrounded on all sides by waterways. They had overflowed a scant few hours ago, and there were still signs of the flooding all around with pools and puddles of standing water. Reaching the plaza required crossing a stone bridge that spanned one of these canals, and beyond the stone bridge, a person stood—a grinning nightmare.

The Archbishop of Gluttony.

Otto Suwen shuddered and licked his lips that suddenly felt very dry and then gritted his teeth.

A cold sweat formed on his back as he dwelled on that introduction. It was only natural. The Archbishop title held that much weight. There were no beings in this city—or the entire world—more loathsome.

But to Otto, Gluttony was far more than just a threat to the world. This was the sworn enemy of everyone who swore allegiance to Emilia.

"…I can already hear Natsuki and Ram complaining about this."

Otto sighed at the fact that it was he who had encountered Gluttony rather than those two, considering their pasts. In all honesty, he was even a little bit relieved.

He was confident that grudges only clouded judgment and priorities. Rage just made it difficult to think clearly.

From that perspective, Otto's animosity toward Gluttony was relatively tame compared to his friends'. But it still required effort to keep his cool.

"…As I recall, the Archbishop of Gluttony went by a different name."

"Oh? Did you meet us before? You must be pretty amazing to still be hanging around, mister. Or is it the opposite? Maybe you're so bland you became leftovers?"

"It doesn't sound like either would be a good thing…"

Otto was more or less certain now that this boy with the smile that revealed so many razor-sharp teeth, Lye Batenkaitos, was not the same Gluttony he remembered.

Otto had encountered someone who called themself Gluttony several hours earlier. At the time, the only thought in his mind was running for dear life, but that Gluttony was unmistakably different from the one standing before him. Now that he had come face-to-face with both, Otto could say for a fact that this couldn't be explained away by one of them being a fake.

All Archbishops possessed a malevolent presence that no one could possibly imitate.

"…So there are two Archbishops of Gluttony. Or I suppose it would be more precise to say there are at least two."

"Oooh… You're not too far off, mister. Pretty good for someone we've never seen before. Maybe it'll be worth seeing where and how you've ripened."

Fear churned Otto's stomach as the cultist smacked his lips and stared intently.

Otto knew he was in trouble. He had left city hall fully aware of the risks, but it was unpleasant to find out he had landed himself in some very hot water.

The plan to simultaneously attack all four of the towers housing the controls for the city's massive water gates had been created under the assumption that their targets would be occupied by one Archbishop apiece. Having one out roaming the city was beyond their calculations.

However, the most unexpected development was actually—

"Hey, quit chitchatting, huckster! This ain't the time or place!"

—the girl yelling at him, who was a miraculous combination of awe-inspiring gallantry and heart-wrenching cuteness. This firebrand with the glimmering golden hair and blazing red eyes was one of the five most notable figures currently in the city. Her name was Felt, and she was one of the royal candidates; her canines bared as she shouted ferociously.

Otto could already feel a headache coming on.

"I certainly don't disagree, but…why are you here, Lady Felt? And out of all the possibilities, you just had to be in the company of an Archbishop…"

"What, you surprised I didn't stay in a shelter? The only reason I said that is 'cause that idiot wouldn't have left otherwise."

"Referring to Sir Reinhard that way is a little…"

Once he saw Felt's scowl, Otto decided to set aside his misgivings for the moment and acknowledge that Felt had a point.

Given how troubled Reinhard had seemed, it was logical to assume he'd be hesitant to leave Felt's side.

Incidentally, this was the second time that Otto had unexpectedly run into Felt since the Witch Cult had occupied the city.

The first time was when Reinhard's father, Heinkel, had taken Felt hostage, forcing his son to do as he said. Otto cursed his terrible luck when he got caught up in that, but he ultimately helped them break the deadlock. After tying Heinkel up, he accompanied Reinhard as they rejoined Subaru and the others.

At the time, Felt had claimed she would stay behind to keep an eye on Heinkel. Wanting her off the battlefield, Reinhard had taken Felt at her word and set off on his own mission.

"But that was just so you could move freely on your own. Of course, that did lead to our current predicament…"

"Who asked you?! I don't need nobody to tell me I've got bad luck! But what's done is done! You play the hand you've got!"

"That may be an admirable outlook, but we'll need more than guts to get out of this."

Otto was genuinely in awe of her determination to stand firm before the Archbishop. She didn't cower in the slightest despite knowing there was no help on the way while her all-powerful knight wasn't by her side. Even so, their hand seemed concerningly weak.

"A-are you sure about this, Felt?! We're dealing with an Archbishop here…?!"

"Grow a pair, Gaston! You don't want to die before you hear your daughter call you Papa, do you?"

The only other card Felt had to play was the big fellow standing next to her with a face that was frozen stiff.

The man called Gaston stepped forward, unarmed, his fists raised. His stance showed he was no stranger to scraps, but unfortunately, his heart wasn't in this particular fight.

I can't deny we're a bit lacking in performers for such an important match. And one against an Archbishop no less.

"Don't be so gloomy. Every chance meeting is just the spice of life—the first step in preparing a gourmet meal! We're called Gluttony, but even we know the importance of good prep work when it comes to cooking."

Batenkaitos's utterly unsympathetic logic tore into Gaston's heart. As he watched the man's spirit desert him, Otto turned his attention to the other party in the plaza—a group of five men clad in white cloaks.

He recognized their uniforms for what they were and knew the face of the man standing at their center.

"They call you Dynas, right? The leader of Mr. Kiritaka's White Dragon's Scale."

"And you're the lad who wheels and deals for Lady Emilia. Not a drop of luck between the two of us."

"Indeed."

Dynas gripped a short sword with both hands as he shrugged. Otto could only agree.

The White Dragon's Scale were private soldiers who answered only to Kiritaka, one of the city's leaders. While their main focus was safeguarding the Muse Company and their master's household, they'd also been running all over, trying to bring back some semblance of order to the city.

Dynas was Kiritaka's right-hand man, and from what Otto had heard, when the Archbishop of Wrath attacked the Muse Company, Dynas had been part of the rear guard that stayed behind to buy Anastasia and the others time to escape.

And the man who had been in charge of that rearguard action, Kiritaka, was nowhere to be seen.

"Our master got snatched up. We've been searching for him."

"Mr. Kiritaka was abducted? That's…"

"We know the odds aren't good. But I'm sure you understand."

When he spoke up, before Otto could finish his dark thought, there was a bitter look on Dynas's face as he shook his head.

Given the current situation, it was incredibly unlikely that Kiritaka was safe and sound after falling into the Witch Cult's clutches. Word had it that the other members of the Council of Ten had already been killed.

He's a business partner and not someone who can just be written off as either an enemy or an ally. More importantly, he took action and fulfilled his duty when push came to shove. That's worthy of respect. I can't blame them for gambling on a long shot.

"Then there's this dilemma…"

Otto, Felt and Gaston, and the White Dragon's Scale. Batenkaitos was standing in the middle of the three groups. At a glance, a bystander might assume they had the advantage. Unfortunately, the situation was not nearly that simple.

I would have liked a few more people who can handle themselves in a fight.

"A head-on collision between the enemy's powerhouse and a hastily assembled group of support staff… I'd laugh if I could," Otto grumbled.

"I don't want to hear it from the guy who decided to go off on a casual stroll all by himself. At least those white robe guys and I are ready to rumble."

Felt's comeback was painfully on point.

Otto had no excuse. Comparing all three groups, he was both unarmed and obviously the least reliable in direct combat.

"Now, now—let's all get along! If anything, you guys should help us! Help us find the one we're looking for! Aah, where could he be? We want to see him! The sooner the better!"

"You want to meet someone…? What are you talking about?"

Otto furrowed his brow at the curious way Batenkaitos phrased his request.

While everyone else had been pessimistically analyzing their fighting capabilities, Batenkaitos began hugging himself, growing increasingly incomprehensible as he rambled on.

Batenkaitos seemed as carefree as could be. If he felt like it, he could crush all of them in an instant.

It's crucial we keep him from deciding to snuff us out. Diplomacy is our best shot.

"It's such a pain having to explain this so many times. 'No,' 'I refuse,' 'never,' 'hell no,' 'of course not.' People never want to open up with us."

Felt scoffed, unmoved. She clearly had no desire to go along with Batenkaitos, but that position ran counter to what Otto was hoping to achieve.

As far as he was concerned, the Archbishops were repulsive on an instinctive level. But communication with them was still possible.

Otto had negotiated with all sorts of creatures using his language blessing. No matter who or what he was dealing with, as long as they could both understand each other, he would find a way to reach some sort of compromise.

No matter how difficult it is to handle Gluttony, it still won't compare to the trouble constantly swirling around Subaru Natsuki. In that sense, just knowing he's out there is almost comforting.

"Come now—there's no need to be hasty. We might even be able to help you. It can't hurt, so why don't we give it a try? Does it have something to do with the demands broadcast, perhaps?"

"There's only one thing we want to know…and it's the location of the hero who gave that other citywide broadcast."

I take it all back. I don't need Natsuki to support me. If possible, I would rather not have his name brought up further.

Totally oblivious to Otto's sudden change of heart, Batenkaitos's cheeks turned a little red, and his body quivered as he put his hands to his face.

“That glorious hero is supposed to come judge us. The anticipation is almost too much! Something might burst at this rate!”

“…How does this man always manage to attract so much trouble?”

I’m sure he would protest and say that he never asked for any of this, but there’s little point in arguing with someone who isn’t even here.

“See! I told you it was a waste of time talking to this nut! Who would sell out their own people?!”

“Technically, we’re rivals, but I suppose we’re all on the same side in this case…”

Otto scratched his cheek, smiling awkwardly at Felt’s declaration.

She’s a good person. If I had met her first, I probably wouldn’t have been against supporting her. That candid nature is a virtue. All the more reason that as someone who is decidedly more twisted, I should point out there’s another way to fight a dangerous enemy.

“As for your request…you need to ask the right person to get anywhere. After all, these other people do not hold the answer you seek, since they weren’t with the one who gave that speech.”

“Oh yeah? That makes it sound like you’re different, mister.”

“Yes, I was with the man himself until just recently. If you would like, I can even lead you right to him.” Three people had three different reactions to Otto’s proposition. Felt’s eyes flared in anger, Dynas’s expression froze, and Batenkaitos’s eyes gleamed. Otto raised his hands, preparing to begin negotiations. “I would very much like to continue living, so how about it? We can talk if you’ll guarantee our lives.”

“Eh! You know?! So you do know! Where our hero is! Our beloved hero! That weak, fragile thing who seems like they’ll fall apart if you don’t hold them together!”

“Huh? Um—well, yes, I do.”

Though he sensed something was off about Batenkaitos’s agitated response, Otto nodded. It almost sounded like he knew Subaru already. That description was a little too close for comfort coming from someone who was supposed to be talking about their ideal.

For the moment, Otto decided to put that sneaking suspicion aside and said, “I would be happy to lead you to him.”

At the end of the day, Subaru Natsuki was involved. It wouldn't be that surprising if he turned out to be acquainted with two or three Archbishops, but it would be a bit unsettling if he knew Greed, Gluttony, Lust, *and* Wrath… That was when Otto realized Subaru was involved with all of them in one way or another…

"What's up? You suddenly started looking real depressed, mister."

"No need to worry about me. More importantly, what do you say? You could kill all of us here and be left without any clues, or I can lead you to your hero in exchange for our safety. What would you prefer?"

"Hmm…"

Batenkaitos remained docile as Otto brought the focus back to negotiations in an attempt to guide the conversation. Despite the terrifying aura Batenkaitos projected, the fact that he entertained this dialogue at all seemed to prove he had a trace of childish naivete. And that imbalance made him all the more unsettling.

Perhaps he never wanted to become such a monstrous creature and had just been a poor boy who—

"—You just thought we're pitiful, didn't you?"

"Eh?"

Just as Otto allowed himself a brief sentimental moment, Batenkaitos's expression suddenly changed. All traces of boyishness disappeared, leaving his eyes hollow and emotionless. Otto could almost swear they were licking his soul.

"That's a look we've seen before. When people look down on us. Make fun of us. Belittle us. Treat us like merchandise… Ahhh, that's why something smelled off."

The emptiness in Batenkaitos's eyes transformed into roaring hatred. Otto's throat froze as he felt goose bumps rising all over his body.

"You're a merchant, aren't you? One of those people who fattens themselves by putting prices on things and selling them to others. The kind who's blindly obsessed with assigning numbers to people and their feelings, offering up anything and everything for gold!"

"That's… I fear there might be some minor misconception at play."

Doing his best to not let his fear show in his voice, Otto furiously thought about how to deal with this dangerous new development. He'd already been walking a tightrope over a gorge, and now it felt like a blindfold had been slipped over his eyes partway through.

Whether he could make it across safely would come down to timing and luck. On second thought, his fate was probably in the hands of the person holding the other end of the rope. Unfortunately, that person's mood had just taken a turn for the worse.

"Argh, damn it! You think you can trick us?! Nice try! Who's going to listen to anything you people have to say?! In the end, gluttony is all there is in this world! Gluttony! Until we get to eat, suck, slurp, lick, gnaw, and swallow, we won't believe a thing!"

"Ha! This was the only way it could've turned out."

Batenkaitos was visibly trembling as he howled, but Felt just snorted in annoyance. While she seemed totally unfazed by his alarming behavior, Otto felt a chill run down his back. He watched as she drew the short sword at her hip and dropped into a practiced stance.

"Ummm, can you fight, Lady Felt?"

"Don't even think about telling me to hang back just 'cause I'm a girl. I don't trust anyone with my life. I'll decide for myself. I'm the master of my fate."

Felt was spirited as she readied herself for combat. Her show of determination was a far cry from her companion, Gaston, whose blood had drained from his face. He didn't look like he could be relied on to provide much help in an imminent fight, and he seemed more like a mascot than anything else. Sort of like a Subaru who was unreliable in a pinch.

"When you put it that way, he doesn't come off very well, does he…?"

In any case, people who are obviously prepared to fight have more options than a bunch who seem timid and uncertain.

Batenkaitos looked toward Felt, then the White Dragon's Scale, and then Otto, drool dripping from his long tongue all the while.

"Are you just about ready? When it comes to gourmet food, preparation and ingredients are crucial. It only starts to have value once you've gathered quality ingredients!"

"I suppose that makes a sort of sense…"

"It's quite all right if you don't understand! We don't have any interest in explaining our aesthetics! Now, I suppose it's just about time—let's dig in!" Batenkaitos opened his mouth wide, revealing rows of sharp teeth as he launched himself toward Otto. Apparently, he had decided on his first course during their conversation.

Standing on the edge of the water, Otto pointed his finger at the profane being charging straight at him.

"In negotiations with a merchant, you should always listen to the very end—because they're bound to have a card up their sleeve."

"Huh?"

"Call it insurance!"

Otto audibly clicked his heels twice as Batenkaitos's brow furrowed in suspicion.

At his signal, the water behind him swelled, as if something drew it toward him.

"—!!!"

And then a swarm of water dragons burst from the canal, biting into Batenkaitos's limbs before flying into a frenzy.

2

"That female sword master is my wife, the previous Sword Saint."

As the two of them made their way to their assigned control tower, Garfiel felt something like a cold grip close around his heart.

Wilhelm, the man called the Sword Devil, was a living legend who had already left a lasting mark on the kingdom's history.

Stories of him and his Sword Saint wife were loved by countless people and were still recounted everywhere.

Because of those stories, Wilhelm's circumstances struck a chord within Garfiel. The fact that Wilhelm was forced to reunite with his wife as enemies made it all the worse.

"From what I heard, the previous Sword Saint was done in by the White Whale…"

"I have avenged that particular transgression. However, it seems our enemies have toyed with my wife's corpse, violating her soul and forcing her to turn her sword on those who she once strove to protect."

"

speechless at the quiet edge to his voice.

What should I say to him as a fellow man? What can *I say? The hell do you say to a man whose beloved wife's been screwed over from beyond the grave, forced to do harm with her blade against her wishes?*

"I…"

Meanwhile, Garfiel carried his own burden that he couldn't bring himself to share.

There was someone who had protected Garfiel and got a sword in the chest for their troubles. The one who had dealt this devastating blow was none other than the woman whom Wilhelm said was his wife. Mimi was still teetering on the brink of death at that very moment, and the only way to save her was to defeat the very same swordswoman who bore the reaper's blessing.

As the person who Mimi saved, Garfiel intended to fulfill that duty no matter what.

"I won't ask you to leave this fight to me. However, it is necessary you understand just how powerful these opponents are. The Sword Saint and Eight-Arms…though I doubt their strength can be compared to when they were alive."

"…You think they're stronger?"

"No, the opposite—they are far from their prime."

Garfiel was not sure how to feel when Wilhelm shook his head.

The young brave had already faced the two corpse warriors once. Not only had he lost to both, but now it turned out neither was as strong as they used to be.

Garfiel loved the stories and legends of heroes. He respected those people who had left their mark on history.

Can I win against the same legends I always looked up to? Can I actually beat them in a real fight?

"—Sir Garfiel."

"Yeah."

He stopped moving when Wilhelm called his name. From up ahead was a presence so intense and overwhelming that it caused goose bumps.

To the front, he could see there were shadows waiting for them on the road that led to the entrance of the tall control tower. One enormous, one slender, and—

"A monstrous form. That must be the Archbishop of Lust."

There was an abnormally swollen figure that writhed as it filled the street. It was hard to see clearly in the moonlight, but there was no mistaking its anomalous presence.

They had heard about Lust's hideous ability from Subaru.

Rubbing the two silver shields on his arms against each other, Garfiel quietly steeled himself.

He had plenty of reasons to hate Lust. This cultist was the source of the corpse soldier who had wounded Mimi, and it was Lust's power that had transformed so many of the city's residents into abominations. And one of the victims who had taken on the shape of a black dragon was a man named Galek Thompson. The man who married Garfiel's mother after she lost her memories. The man who Garfiel's new siblings called Father.

How badly would they be hurt to find out that their beloved father and husband had been robbed of his human form? This had become more than personal for Garfiel. That was why—

"You gonna regret comin' out here like Olegren sitting by the fire."

Garfiel banged his fists together as he glared at Lust and the corpse soldiers under her command. Beside him, Wilhelm lowered his hand to the sword at his waist. All traces of warmth had disappeared from his eyes.

Every last strand of Garfiel's hair stood on end when he looked over at Wilhelm, who seemed keen as any blade. Noticing his glance, Wilhelm nodded ever so slightly.

Then—

"—Ngh!"

Garfiel and Wilhelm both launched themselves forward at the exact same time.

The stone pavement exploded from the force of the Sword Devil's charge. Staying low to the ground, he closed the distance in the blink of an eye. In front of him, there was a flash of silver.

Their enemies were two sword masters and a disfigured beast. There was no hesitation in Wilhelm's sword as he swung at the slender woman.

There was another silvery flash, and a loud *clang* echoed in the night sky as the smaller sword master's slim blade diverted Wilhelm's beautiful first strike. It was a feat of genius, making the swords look like they were dancing. However, Wilhelm had not been aiming to take her head.

The gale unleased by the force of the sword threw back the hood of the slender fighter, revealing what lay hidden beneath.

“

road beneath them.

Judging by the feeling in his own arms, Garfiel could tell he was in top condition and his head was in the game.

Completely unfazed by his initial failure, he immediately followed up by unleashing a flurry of attacks, attempting to make up for his lack of additional arms with pure momentum.

“Urrraaaaaaaaagh!”

Fists, claws, kicks, fangs—he rained blows down on Kurgan from every possible angle.

Seeing gashes appear on Kurgan's blue skin and blood starting to flow, Garfiel knew for a fact his attacks were not in vain.

They were connecting. They were working. Garfiel's claws could reach the legendary warrior, Eight-Arms.

Forget the rush of battle and anything else that interferes with your concentration. Shut out all the noise. Pour everything into this one life-and-death moment and become a tiger—otherwise, you'll die.

"Ooooooooooo!"

Roaring like a beast as he swung wildly, Garfiel took aim at the enemy's throat.

—Garfiel was plagued by idle thoughts.

Ram had pointed it out to him before. He let his mind wander too much when he was fighting. He was always worrying about something or another, even though he wasn't particularly good at figuring things out.

Like the way he yielded the battle against the bearer of the reaper's blessing to Wilhelm despite not discussing it beforehand. Or the fact that in the middle of this fight with the Archbishop of Lust, he was worried about his mother, who had lost her memory. He also worried about his half brother and half sister. He even fretted over Subaru and Otto, wondering if they were safe even though they were so much stronger than him.

Can a weakling like me who got scared of Reinhard really save Mimi?

He desperately tried to drive those thoughts from his mind and focus on the battle in front of him. But what was the difference between thinking about something and actively trying to not think about it?

And the moment those swirling thoughts distracted him, Garfiel got thrown clear by an enormous arm.

"Gargh."

His eyes shot wide open as the air left his lungs and his body was sent flying.

But that wasn't the end of it. A crushing blow from above slammed him into the stone pavement. As Garfiel coughed up blood from the impact, a foot came crashing down onto his face.

His nose was crushed by the blow delivered in absolute silence. The blood now streaming from his nose blurred his vision and made it difficult to breathe. Then he was kicked up into the air, where he was pummeled mercilessly again and again and again.

“Gh, gah…gho?!”

His vision grew red. He didn’t even have a chance to catch his breath. There were literally no openings in the deluge of attacks unleashed by eight different arms. Garfiel was being toyed with like a pathetic rag doll.

Throughout this whole ordeal, his opponent didn’t say a word as he mercilessly punished Garfiel with all eight of his giant fists.

“

standing still.

I can’t be jerkin’ around like this. The hell do I think he is? I already made my choice.

“This ain’t the time to be stupid—”

Gritting his teeth, he bit the inside of his cheek hard. He came to his senses as the taste of blood filled his mouth.

Kurgan was standing there with dignity, looking at Garfiel.

“What’s the point of bein’ here if I’m just gonna get scared now?! Boss! Bro! Everyone waitin’ for me! All I’m good for is fightin’!”

He howled. Even if it was fake courage, all he could do was use what he had.

Holding his ground, he pulled strength from the earth itself. With the power of his blessing, his broken bones reconnected, and his shattered face knitted itself back together. Then Garfiel took a step forward.

The next instant, he unleashed an attack with all his strength, as if willing it to become the signal for his counterattack. His arms groaned as the swelling power of the earth converged on a single point. When released, it had enough destructive force to level an entire building and even blow out one of the canals.

He used that power to drive his silver shields straight into the legend in front of him. His arms shot forward toward Kurgan’s chest and—

“—Yep, should’ve seen that comin’.”

The attack he had poured everything into had been blocked by the two trusty swords that Kurgan had wielded in life, the demon cleavers now crossed in front of him.

The force of the blow hadn’t been nullified. It hadn’t been parried or deflected, either.

In a contest of raw power, Garfiel’s attack had failed to match the legendary warrior.

“—Sir Garfiel!”

As Garfiel stopped moving, Wilhelm’s distant voice reached his ears.

He should have been in the middle of a furious sword fight that required his undivided attention, and yet, he still called out to Garfiel.

—That was just how much danger Garfiel was in.

“—Ah.”

It was no longer the imposing stature of Kurgan that filled Garfiel's eyes. The warrior was simply standing there while the great, writhing shadow behind him closed in on Garfiel from all directions.

The immense shadow was going to swallow Garfiel whole right along with Kurgan. The great writhing thing that had been lurking in the shadows from the start of the battle—

"—isn't Lust?"

He only realized the true identity of the shadow he had assumed was an Archbishop right when it got terrifyingly close.

It was a large, churning mass of blood. An intense smell of gore filled his nose as his body was engulfed by the nauseating, ruinous thing.

"

before. If Ricardo was a less observant and perceptive person, he never would've survived—neither as a slave nor as a mercenary.

"Call it the benefit of experience! I am our group's reliable old man, after all. I don't mind lendin' an ear to my son-in-law."

"I would never even consider harboring such disrespectful thoughts about Lady Anastasia."

"I didn't say one word about the lady. Maybe I meant Mimi for all you know. And she isn't the only option, either. So you jumpin' to conclusions makes that excuse pretty damn unconvincing."

Julius grimaced at that very sound point. The way he pensively touched his hair was a familiar sight, but Ricardo sniffed, sensing that Julius was overthinking things a little more than usual.

There was no denying that the ways Julius moved and talked were slightly less refined than normal. The moment he noticed that, Ricardo relied on the sense of smell he had honed over the years.

"Does it have somethin' to do with how the fight to reclaim the tower went south? You been off ever since then. The lady didn't press you on it, but you can bet I'm not gonna hold back."

"You just won't let me be."

"Damn straight. I got my life on the line here. I ain't interested in trustin' my back to someone who ain't sure of themselves. Pretty good logic if ya ask me. You got a problem with that?"

"…No, you are absolutely right. I'm the one in the wrong."

Julius shook his head slowly, furrowing his brow.

That was proof that Julius was in the grips of some disquiet that he found difficult to put into words. But even while acknowledging that struggle, no details were forthcoming.

Even though he fully admitted he had been mistaken, Julius still couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"Why stop there? What're ya hesitatin' for? You just hafta say whatever's on your mind, right? What are you so worried…I mean, what are you waverin' about?"

"…Apologies for my inarticulacy. My words are failing me. I struggle to understand exactly why I feel so troubled." Julius responded to Ricardo's quiet question with an anxious expression. He touched the hilt of the knight's sword at his hip as Ricardo frowned. "As you guessed, the source of my doubts is the battle at city hall—or more precisely, the Archbishop with whom I crossed blades. The boy who called himself Gluttony, Roy Alphard."

"You're not about to tell me ya feel bad about fightin' a kid, are ya?"

"My resolve isn't that weak, surely. Even if the opponent is a child, if he has immersed himself in an unforgivable and villainous life, then he must be judged for his sins. No, what truly troubles me is…" Julius paused, sighing slightly. "…I can't get his words out of my head."

"What…?"

"Most likely, Gluttony's authority involves people's memories. Lady Crusch has lost her memories. Then there's the girl in Subaru's faction who has been forgotten by everyone. It would be wise to assume that there are similar victims in this city as well. And…"

"And?"

"We cannot assume that such suffering only affects others."

Ricardo crinkled his nose at that roundabout wording, but a second later, he realized what Julius was saying.

"You mean one of our comrades ended up being food for Gluttony?"

"…When Gluttony encountered me on the rooftop of the building, he clearly acted like someone who knew me. He spoke of things that could only have come from someone within our camp."

"But that's…"

Ricardo wanted to laugh it off as absurd, but that would just be dodging the question.

If Julius's suspicions were correct, if Gluttony had laid his hands on someone connected to them and they had lost all memories of that person—

"Mimi and the others are all accounted for, though. Then there's me and the lady…and you're here, too. So who could be missin'?"

"It's quite possible our inability to ascertain that is also the result of Gluttony's ability. For all we know, one of our comrades may have been torn away with us none the wiser."

It was a malevolent ability that only grew more horrific the more they understood how it worked. This dark power bore a resemblance to the dangerous effects of the fog they'd had to deal with during the battle with the White Whale. Anyone who succumbed to that demon beast's fog was completely erased from all memory.

However, the Archbishop of Gluttony who nourished himself by consuming stolen memories had an even more abhorrent power.

But—

“What’s there to be frettin’ about?”

“Mrgh…”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s definitely an aggravatin’ idea. The thought of forgettin’ our own while that bastard’s off gallivantin’ around makes my blood boil—but it don’t change what we needta do.”

“Defeat the Archbishop of Gluttony and restore everyone’s memories.”

“And then we free the whole damn city and come home heroes. How you gonna call yourself the finest anything if you let him be the only one showin’ off?!”

Ricardo flashed a dazzling grin as he tried to raise Julius’s spirits. For a second, Julius was taken aback by the heavy-handed gesture, but then his expression softened.

“There we go. Looks like you’re back in the groove. See what happens when you let it out a bit?”

“It’s true. My deepest thanks. You truly are worthy of being the leader of the Iron Fangs.”

“Aw, you gonna make me blush. I’ve just been around the block a few times ’s all!”

Ricardo raked his hand through his long dark-brown hair and then set off again in long strides. Because of that, thinking the problem was resolved, he didn’t see Julius’s expression. The almost overwhelming anguish that rose to the surface and the way he instantly hid it behind a mask both went undetected.

Julius felt an indescribable unease and vulnerability when it came to Gluttony. It was a feeling that he couldn’t really convey to Ricardo. Or perhaps it was an instinctual alarm warning him that Gluttony was an enemy he had to avoid at all costs.

But Julius had sworn a vow to his master, to his friend, and to his sword.

Gluttony had made quite a few enemies, and a great many people had good reason to wish they could be the one to strike him down. But circumstance barred the way. Fate had not offered them a chance to bring an end to Gluttony, who had forced them to endure such outrage.

Julius had assumed that burden with their blessings. He was duty bound to force down his unease and forge ahead.

—Go forth, Julius Juukulius. If ye would be a knight who does not

betray their code. And if at the end of thy path ye become prideworthy, then—

"Ah, you really did come to see us. How moving."

—slay that man-eating fiend with thy knightly blade.

Straight ahead, Julius and Ricardo could see the second control tower. In the center of the plaza right in front of the tall structure stood a small figure calmly watching them.

It was a young boy in a long green robe, his distinct brown hair neatly braided. He looked to be in his early teens, barely out of childhood. Just a simple, innocent child.

Or at least that's what they would've believed if it were not for the incredible menacing energy emanating from every pore of his body.

"…My bad for what I said earlier, Julius."

"Whatever for?"

"Nah…it's just that even suggestin' ya might've treated that thing like a kid ain't any different from callin' you an idiot."

Staring at the boy who had come out to meet them in the plaza, Ricardo crossed his arms.

He acknowledged that this boy was wholly abnormal. It was obvious to anyone who met him face-to-face. To treat him as a mere child was the same as committing suicide. It was beyond foolhardy for anyone who didn't possess ungodly amounts of strength, like Reinhard.

"Of course, Reinhard never would've allowed a second encounter to occur. That this chance meeting has happened at all is proof that you have already deviated from the correct path."

"Ha-ha, you really like talking that way, don't you?! Not that we hate it. How to put it? It's poetic. And flowery. Like a beautiful table setting!"

The boy clapped his hands and grew visibly animated by Julius's words. Julius had intended it as ridicule, but the boy didn't seem to pick up on that at all.

Stepping forward, Julius, side by side with Ricardo, fixed the cheerfully laughing boy with a piercing gaze.

"—Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard."

"Ah, we figured you'd come. We believed in you. Right, right, that's right, exactly, of course. And because we kept wishing for it! Gluttony! Gluttony! It's worth the wait!"

Alphard shuddered as he clutched his slender body. There was no mistaking it. That was the same sort of reaction he'd had when they met on the rooftop.

"What a disturbin' kid. That's the same one, right?"

"Yes, it is him—as deplorable as it may be to become an Archbishop at that age."

Julius nodded sharply at the question Ricardo asked with a scowl. Staring at both of them, Alphard ran the tip of his long tongue across his teeth.

"You even brought us a puppy to eat this time! So thoughtful! After all, we'll eat anything if it'll make us feel full."

"How the hell do you say crap like that right to someone's face? I dunno where to begin. First off, I ain't your food. And just so ya know, I eat well enough, so it's not like my meat's bad, either."

Ricardo drew a large cleaver from his back and adopted a loose stance.

"Your reply became a little strange at the end, Ricardo," Julius commented as he rested his hand on his own sword, readying himself for the battle that would soon be upon them. "I was getting tired of listening to your insults, so I asked a friend to join me… I don't imagine you would call that unfair?" he asked.

"Ah, you can spare us those sorts of excuses. That's probably your way of encouraging yourself, but the flavor is lacking. We said we'd eat anything, but that doesn't mean we go out of our way to eat bland things."

"*Bland* is a rather unkind way to put it given your warm welcome earlier."

"And you don't deny it. That part of you is cute. Yeah, a nice bittersweet."

Alphard waved his hand nonchalantly, his attitude as flippant and frivolous as ever. It was unclear if that was intentional provocation or just his natural attitude, but while Julius coolly let it pass, Ricardo scoffed audibly.

"You sure like runnin' that mouth of yours, kid. If you think you're gettin' off easy 'cause you a brat, you got another think comin'. Ain't nothin' cute about you. Not like Lady Anna ain't done plenty of shady things, but it'd be a crime to compare her to you—I'll cave your skull in."

"Ooooh, scary, scary. Don't glare at us like that. Did being called a puppy bother you that much? Sorry, Ricardo—we're sorry. Despite how it seems, we actually admired you a little bit, you know? Like your fearlessness and that loud, brash way you talk!"

"…I get it now. This is making me mad, all right."

Ricardo gritted his teeth when the boy addressed him by name. What Julius had said earlier suddenly made a lot more sense.

It was as if one of their comrades had been done in, giving the enemy intimate details about them. It wasn't explicit, but there was no other way to interpret Alphard's behavior, and it stoked a vague, indefinite anger in Ricardo's heart.

And that was surely what Gluttony was aiming for.

"Exchanging more words with him would mean playing into his hand. That's not what we want."

"Whoa there. That's a rather dignified way of saying it, but you're ignoring our feelings, aren't you? Not that boring conclusion again! You're awfully good at acting disinterested even though you really want to know more!"

"

"You got it."

As the two of them assumed fighting stances, Alphard bared his sharp fangs. He spread his arms wide, bringing his hands out of the cloak's long sleeves and revealing that he was wearing metallic claws. He articulated all ten razor-sharp claws, fully intending to take on the two of them with those weapons.

A child's slender arms and unreliable tools more suited for covert action. It was a combination that seemed utterly unsuited to match the force of even Julius's knight's sword, let alone Ricardo's massive cleaver, but—

"Julius Juukulius the spirit knight is ever vigilant!"

As the battle began, Julius properly introduced himself with chivalrous courtesy.

Naturally, a mercenary like Ricardo felt no obligation to observe knightly etiquette in a life-and-death struggle.

Faced with those two different extremes of fighting spirit, Alphard licked his lips.

"Yes, yes, yes, ah, just so, right, good, exactly, absolutely! Gluttony! Gluttony! Gourmet, garbage, and gorging! We will eat it all! Your unremarkable life will be a new flavor to satiate us!"

"*—El Clauzeria*!"

Julius chanted as he held his sword at the ready, facing down the howling Alphard.

The dazzling six colors of light formed a circle right in front of him. The moment he thrust his sword in the center of the circle, an aurora erupted from it and shot straight at Alphard.

This was an attack that blended the six magics, creating a glimmering destructive rainbow that swallowed up everything in its path.

Julius began the battle by unleashing his strongest technique, not holding back at all. Like he had stated at the start, he had no intention of letting his guard down. This was not an enemy he could confront with anything less.

"Urrrraaaaaa!"

In time with the flash of dazzling light, Ricardo dashed forward with enough force to crack the stone pavement. He raised his blade, prepared to strike down Alphard no matter how the boy tried to react to the multicolored blast.

An attack shrouded in a gale and a rainbow aurora that was a manifestation of pure destruction—facing these two baleful threats at the same time, Alphard sneered, baring his fiendish fangs.

That villainous grin stirred a sinister unease in Julius's breast. The true nature of the feeling was akin to what had been eating away at him since before they had embarked on this battle. Julius gritted his teeth.

Struck by the troubling omen of what was to come, he watched as Roy Alphard, still sneering, began to speak.

"—It's wonderful how true to form you are, Brother."

CHAPTER 1

THE BATTLE WITH GREED BEGINS

1

"—Subaru!"

Kicking in the door to the chapel, Subaru and Reinhard were greeted by an angelic voice.

It was the voice of a beauty beyond human comprehension standing at the altar in a white bridal gown—Emilia.

She was utterly gorgeous in that pure-white dress and with her long, glimmering silver hair adorned with charming accessories. It was so dazzling, Subaru thought he would go blind, and he wished that he had chosen the outfit himself.

"E M A to the max…! Anyway, it looks like we just barely made it in time."

Glancing around the chapel, Reinhard nodded to himself as he picked up on the faint tension in the air. "And judging from the situation, it seems the ceremony was not proceeding smoothly. Apparently, we need not worry too much about being unwelcome."

The chapel was spacious. A red carpet ran along the floor, and the walls were covered in decorations, lending the ceremony a solemn air and making the altar a florid stage for the bride- and groom-to-be. There were around fifty guests in attendance, all of them gorgeous women in matching dresses, which made for a vibrant and enchanting scene.

It would have been picture-perfect were it not for the fact that there wasn't any trace of human emotion in their eyes. Every last one of them bore lifeless, doll-like expressions.

"Not too shocking, but even if we weren't here for Emilia-tan, this doesn't seem like a normal wedding."

"Emilia…tan?"

Subaru's comment elicited an immediate reaction from the man in a white suit standing at the altar—Regulus. His lips curled in distaste as he glared at the uninvited guest.

"So it's *you*? You're the one that insolent and wanton woman dallied with? …How incomprehensible. If it was that fellow with the red hair, at least it would make a little more sense, but to choose you over me? Are her eyes decorative glass beads?"

"At least call them jewels. Also, I'm obviously not gonna be impressive if you compare me to this guy, so cut it out already."

"Silence. What was supposed to be a festive and blessed occasion will now be a wake. You should ready yourselves for the transition from guests to mourners… No, I suppose that's unnecessary, since you will be joining the departed soon enough."

Regulus's voice dropped low, dripping with naked animosity.

"You're awfully cocksure despite everything. Forget a divorce at the airport right after the honeymoon—your ass got turned down at the altar. Shouldn't you be a bit more embarrassed?" Subaru taunted. "Also, did you not hear this guy introduce himself?" he said as he jerked his chin in Reinhard's direction.

Regulus's golden eyes narrowed.

"What was it? Sword Saint?" he responded disinterestedly. "I've heard the term before. Isn't that the title of some hopeless fool with no talent save waving a sword around? You think bringing someone like that and appealing to that power will make me prostrate myself? Why, that's positively comical. You believe the decrepit conservatism of storied lineages and the like would be enough to lay me low? That's nothing but the harbinger of an unsightly defeat at the hands of true progress. Was that what you were hoping to act out here today?"

"'No talent save waving a sword around' is a fitting way to put it. Honestly, that is the root of much that people expect of me. But whether I'll be able to fulfill that role here is still unclear."

"Oh? So you recognize the difference in our strengths? That's somewhat impressive."

Regulus was fearless in his response, but Reinhard responded with a simple no and a shake of his head. His hand rested on the hilt of the sword at his waist—the white holy sword that he always carried wherever he went.

Reinhard took a deep breath before he continued.

"This Dragon Sword is an heirloom of sorts, passed down from the founders of the Astrea family. It is undoubtedly the greatest sword in the world. However…it has a single flaw."

"Oh, really now? And what is that?"

"It's impossible to draw from its sheath except in the presence of a worthy enemy. In other words"—Reinhard's blue eyes pierced Regulus—"this sword has apparently decided that you aren't a fitting opponent."

"—Ngh!"

Whatever Reinhard's intention with that comment, Regulus's face twisted up in bitter humiliation.

Subaru knew that Reinhard wasn't lying, recalling that time he couldn't draw his sword during the fight against Elsa. Of course, that revelation would be no consolation for Regulus.

"Now, listen here! What use is a Sword Saint who can't even wield his own sword properly? Don't patronize me, you worthless third-raters. You and I exist in different worlds. You are incomplete, whereas I am a complete whole! Dullards incapable of measuring their own worth except in comparison to others have no right to judge me!"

"Talk about whiplash…," Subaru murmured.

"What now?"

"Has it been too long since someone set you straight? You seem awfully hung up on comparing yourself to others for someone who's perfectly complete or whatever."

"—! A defective man like you has no right to preach to a fulfilled man such as I!!!"

Subaru just couldn't resist pointing out the obvious, and Regulus snapped in a rage, finally resorting to something stronger than just words.

The villain launched himself forward as he shouted, sending a torrent of destruction tearing through the chapel straight at the two interlopers. Stone, wood—it made no difference. Everything was ground to dust by the force of his attack.

"Subaru, this way."

"Whoa?!"

Subaru yelped as Reinhard grabbed him by the waist and leaped into the air, easily clearing the rush of devastation. Subaru's eyes were still spinning when Reinhard gently lowered him to the floor. After effortlessly dodging that attack in a single bound, the

Sword Saint prepared to close in on Regulus.

"Don't move! If you try anything, consider their lives forfeit!"

However, he was stopped in his tracks when Regulus took the other attendees hostage. Even though he was pointing his hands directly at them in an open threat, the ornately dressed women watched the battle unfold with eyes devoid of emotion or any sort of human reaction.

"Damn, this goes way beyond having nerves of steel. Who in the world are these ladies?"

"They are my precious wives, beautiful maidens who love me as I love them. Would you really condemn these blameless women to horrible deaths? Despicable fiends, have you no shame?!"

"Wow. I had kind of guessed it already, but there's really no point talking to you, is there?"

It was hard to tell how serious Regulus was. Nothing he said really made much sense. To begin with, he was the one taking his supposedly beloved wives hostage. But what made it worse was the fact that his nonsensical threat was actually effective against Subaru and Reinhard.

"I would never wish harm upon any of my wives. But if you resist, then I will have no choice but to kill them one by one… How cruel and monstrous you must be to willingly force me to commit such an atrocity."

"What are you even talking about? We aren't threatening anything."

"Quit making excuses! They may die by my hand, but it was you who forced me to act. It will be your murderous intent that ultimately kills them. You are nothing more than murderers using me to do your dirty work. Don't try to shirk responsibility for it, you filthy murderers…!"

Gnashing his teeth, Regulus glared at the two of them with hate-filled eyes. He was dead serious. He believed every word that passed between his lips. Even his sense of justice wasn't a lie.

If it was even remotely possible, Subaru wanted to save the hostages. But they were dealing with a killer who might explode at any moment, and there were fifty or so people. Even Reinhard couldn't save all of them at once.

Tension filled the air as Regulus took control of the situation—

"—Don't forget about me."

A sudden flash of pale light appeared next to Regulus as he stared down Subaru and Reinhard.

The light filled the whole chapel, and the next moment, there was a loud *crack* as the air froze. Countless more *cracks* followed, composing a melody that filled the building.

Then a massive barrier of ice rose in the middle of the chapel.

The glimmering blue wall immediately separated Regulus from the women he had been threatening. It also swallowed the altar whole and encased the lower half of Regulus's body, pinning him to the floor.

An instant later, Emilia pressed a sword of ice to his throat.

"You let your guard down. You lose."

"…I cannot believe this. Do you not have a considerate bone in your body? I just managed to corner those interlopers. This is the moment my wives should be praising me for bravely driving away the evildoers. All the others trusted that my response was right and good. So what are you doing?"

"Release me and the others at once. I can't speak for everyone, but at least some of them are surely just obeying you out of fear. You should take good care of anyone who actually wants to stay with you after that and—"

"Emilia! Get away! That's not going to stop him!"

"Eh?"

Ordinarily, this would have been the end of the battle. Emilia normally wouldn't be wrong to assume that. But Regulus was not normal or ordinary.

"It seems I made the right choice not taking you as my wife."

With just a heavy sigh and a slight twist of his body, Regulus broke free from the ice supposedly holding him down. Emilia's eyes widened when his icy restraints came away. Before anyone could react, Regulus grabbed her pale neck with one hand and easily lifted her up into the air.

"Gh, hagh…"

"You clearly have a violent streak, and worst of all, you don't understand how to properly support and respect your man. With such a naturally capricious attitude, it matters not that you are still a virgin in body and mind. A wretch toying with my pure heart is all you are. I've never before encountered such a wicked woman."

Regulus watched with annoyance as Emilia frantically swung her legs, kicking him in the chest and crotch to no avail.

"Stop it! Get your stupid hands off her!" Subaru shouted.

"Stupid?" Regulus cocked his head. "Surely you must be speaking about yourself. Can you not see what is happening around you? Or have you simply given up on trying to understand it? Must I explain every little thing? You're just relying on the kindness of others and not bothering to even try thinking for yourself. What does that make you as a person?"

"Ngh…"

"Very well. Please release Lady Emilia. We will hear your demands."

Subaru gulped as Reinhard spoke up. The villain's cheeks warped as he turned to face Reinhard.

"Yes, yes. That's it. This is how people should behave. With humility and grace. Language evolved so everyone could have a chance to achieve their desires. That's why it's important to use our words. There are so, so many people who attempt to resolve things by force when diplomacy would've sufficed."

"There's no need for long statements. It pains both my friend and me to see her suffer any further."

"Really? Then allow me to be frank—throw aside that sword hanging at your hip and come over here."

To punctuate his demand, Regulus raised Emilia even higher into the air. While he was holding her, she swung her sword of ice at him several times, but it didn't seem to affect him in the slightest.

Reinhard removed the Dragon Sword without any hesitation and handed it to Subaru.

"…If push comes to shove, I'll yank this out and cut him in half."

"That's certainly one plan, but unfortunately, I suspect you won't be able to draw it, either. Don't worry. I promise I'll retrieve Lady Emilia."

After that whispered exchange, Reinhard walked forward unarmed.

"That's far enough."

Regulus ordered Reinhard to stop around five yards away from him, and Reinhard obeyed.

Reinhard could cover that distance in the blink of an eye, but Regulus was in a position where he could kill Emilia with the twitch of a finger. Even if Reinhard was the strongest being alive, he still had to tread carefully.

And Regulus's power—Greed's Authority—was still a complete unknown.

His power made him seemingly impervious to attack while also providing him with overwhelming strength. Of course, there was no such thing as a perfect ability, and a weakness of some kind had to exist. That would be the key to defeating him.

Unfortunately, right then and there, Subaru didn't have a plan for how to thread the needle and regain control of the situation, so he had no choice but to rely on Reinhard.

"I have done as you asked. What now?"

"I suppose 'die by my hands' would be a tad uncouth. You have demonstrated your good faith for the sake of my wives and this wretched woman. As such, I would like to respond in kind. I don't want to be mistaken for a selfish and spineless man. I want people to know that I am a simple man who is untroubled by grand desires. I am content with nothing more than the small and simple moments of happiness that can be found in everyday life."

"You don't want to be misunderstood? I see. I can understand that quite well."

"Doesn't it just make sense? In any case, I have but one condition: Endure one of my attacks without evading or blocking it. Do that and I shall consider the quarrel between you and me water under the bridge. I shall forgive your craven attempts to kill me and my wives. What do you say to that?"

Reinhard considered the proposal in silence. To Subaru, it sounded like the rawest deal ever.

Even Reinhard couldn't possibly withstand the full force of Regulus's power.

"Very well, I accept."

However, despite Subaru's unease, Reinhard readily accepted the proposal. Subaru gazed in shock as Regulus's smile deepened.

"A splendid resolve. It appears even the most despicable of thieves has a scrap of honor. Allow me to show my respect."

Subaru felt a wave of revulsion wash over him as Regulus spouted more self-aggrandizing garbage. Slowly, Regulus pointed his left hand at Reinhard. He still held Emilia in the air with his right.

"Reinhard, you've got something planned, right? I'm trusting you here."

"We made a promise, Subaru. You'll take care of what I cannot, right?"

"Sure, but it's a real bad omen to bring that up right now."

His vague response wasn't the most reassuring, but Subaru wanted to believe that Reinhard had accepted the proposal with some idea of how to come out on top. But before he could probe any more, Regulus lightly flicked his outstretched arm.

Subaru's eyes didn't see anything. But it was clear that casual gesture had sent something flying toward Reinhard. Was it an invisible attack like Petelgeuse's Unseen Hands? Even that was impossible for him to tell.

The only thing Subaru knew for a fact was that Reinhard had collapsed in a spray of blood.

As he fell to his knees before crumpling completely, a tremendous amount of crimson stained the carpet as the Sword Saint's limbs quivered in silence.

"Wha…?"

Those jerking movements were the spasms that occurred when the body was on the verge of death. And when even those ceased, it was a sign that the last dregs of life were gone.

There was no doubt that Reinhard van Astrea was dead.

"No matter what kind of life we lead, death comes all too quickly. However great the achievements, however terrible the sins, death comes for all equally. In this world, where all sorts of inequality go unpunished, death is a kind and cruel equalizer."

Regulus closed his eyes after watching his blow end Reinhard's life. The villain wore a quiet expression as he commented on the results of his own actions as if it were some act of the heavens.

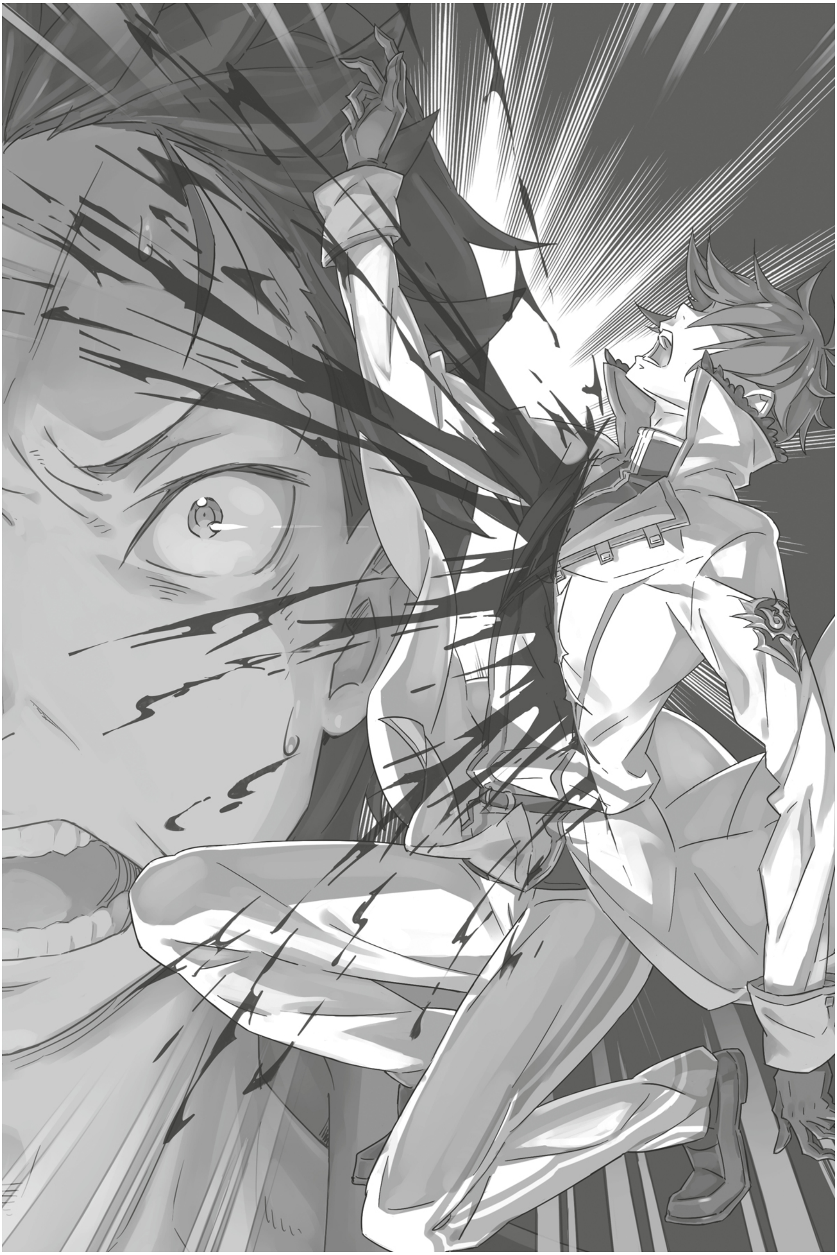
"The end will come for us all someday. That is why the living continually seek out joy. And I am satisfied with the simpler things in life. If I was a greedy person, driven by unbridled avarice for anything and everything in this world, I would never be able to find happiness. But I am blessed to find satisfaction in the little things."

Touching his chest with the arm that had taken Reinhard's life, Regulus let out a trembling breath. And then he posed a simple question.

"As one who is content, allow me to ask: Were you content in death? If you were not, then you have my condolences."

"Uraaaaaa!"

Subaru roared to drown out the absurdities spilling from Regulus's mouth and hurled a chair at him. The chair splintered as Regulus violently brushed it aside before turning a distasteful gaze on Subaru.



“Compared to his purity, you are both noisy and unsightly.”

“As it happens, I’m pretty damn proud of being an unknightly knight!”

Stepping onto the carpet stained by Reinhard’s blood, Subaru pulled out his trusty Guilty Whip from his hip and let fly at Regulus with a *crack* as he ran up the aisle.

In response, Regulus pointedly raised Emilia up.

“Are your eyes mere decoration? Can you not see I have a hostage?”

“—That’s odd. As I recall, you said you would release the hostages.”

“—?!”

Regulus’s face warped in shock when he heard that voice.

Behind Subaru, what looked like red holy light slowly rose from the ground. The blood that had spilled out changed into a blazing flame that revived the man who had fallen—the red-haired, blue-eyed superhuman was standing again.

“—Blessing of the phoenix.”

A charming voice answered Regulus’s unspoken question, and in the blink of an eye, the balance of power completely changed.

“

chapel's interior with the streets of the city just as the first signs of evening appeared in the sky.

Subaru covered his mouth with one hand to avoid inhaling all the dust and rubble in the air now that the chapel had all new and improved ventilation. He used his other hand to point at Reinhard.

"Are we sure you're not a monster?!"

"I've said it before, but that's rather cruel, Subaru. I have feelings, too, you know."

"Forget about your hurt feelings for a sec! Try having a body that can be hurt, too! What *was* that just now?!"

Subaru was awestruck once again by just how absurd Reinhard's strength could be. Then he looked at the woman in his arms who he had pulled away from Regulus.

"Sorry for cutting that so close. Are you all right? You aren't injured anywhere, are you?"

Subaru kept his voice earnest and was careful to not scare her, but her reaction was less than encouraging. She slumped down on the spot and didn't seem to hear Subaru at all.

He couldn't say for sure whether it was due to shock or something else entirely.

"—Subaru."

Standing next to the destroyed altar, Reinhard turned and called to Subaru. The sword of ice that had contributed so magnificently to the destruction of the chapel was crumbling in his hand.

It had landed one of Reinhard's attacks. That alone was worthy of praise. And the sword's creator, Emilia, was being supported by Reinhard's left arm.

In that momentary clash, Reinhard had deftly stolen her away from Regulus. Beside him, Emilia held her throat while enduring a painful coughing fit.

"Emilia-tan! Are you all right?"

"Gah, ack… I'm fine. My throat is just a little sore…"

"He didn't do anything to you? Or say anything strange? He seems like the type who might just try to randomly lick a girl's cheeks or something. Also, that wedding dress is really cute. Who helped you change? It wasn't Regulus, was it? Grrr, I'm never gonna forgive that asshole. But the dress choice really is a good one. You're cute no matter what you wear. You really are my angel."

"C-calm down, Subaru. I don't understand what you're saying at all."

Subaru was breathing hard through his nose even as Emilia urged him to stop, her cheeks glowing red. Seeing how worried Subaru was made her break into a smile.

"I'm fine, really. Thank you. I knew you would come for me."

"I knew you would believe in me and wait. Honestly, the two things I was most worried about were not making it in time for the ceremony and that you would go on a rampage before we got here…"

"Hee-hee, you didn't need to worry. I would never marry him. If I was going to get married, it would have to be to someone I love."

"Right! Phew, that's a relief. Speaking of which, about that someone…"

"Oh no! Subaru, you're hurt! Is your leg okay?!"

Before Subaru could satisfy his curiosity, Emilia noticed his injury. His right leg was wrapped up tightly in bandages with a faint amount of blood still oozing from it. Emilia's concern completely overrode Subaru's attempt to steer the conversation.

"It's fine, it's fine," Subaru said as he tapped his foot on the ground. "I know it looks bad, but surprisingly, it doesn't bother me too much. The bandages just make it look a bit dramatic is all."

"Really? You always just grin and bear it, so I'm a little worried…"

"I appreciate the concern, but I wouldn't lie in a situation like this. More importantly…"

Subaru shifted the subject to something more pressing than his leg—namely Reinhard, who had let Regulus deal him a mortal wound in order to free Emilia.

"Are you all good, Reinhard? …Holy shit! Is that really okay?!"

Looking closer, his eyes widened as he finally noticed just how gruesome his friend appeared. The front of Reinhard's white jacket had been dramatically ripped apart, and the visible parts of his chest were drenched in blood. Emilia let out a cry as well when she noticed. It looked like he had been caught in an explosion.

"Th-that's terrible! We have to get your clothes off! Let me heal you!"

"Apologies for worrying you. Despite how it looks, this isn't a problem. See? There's no wound."

Smiling at the two of them, Reinhard wiped the blood away with his white sleeve, confirming that there was no gaping wound on his chest. There was only unmarked skin beneath the gore.

“There’s…nothing there… But you definitely got hit earlier. And then there was that burst of fire.”

“Right! It was *really* blazing. I was surprised, too. What happened?”

“It’s a little difficult to explain. Suffice to say it was the correct move in that situation. It helped that you stood back and watched, Subaru. Thanks to that, he didn’t notice what was going on.”

“I just figured you’d be able to do something. The method you chose definitely came out of left field, though.” A little put off by Reinhard dodging the question, Subaru just blurted out what he had been thinking in the moment. “Still, I got seriously worried. I swear it looked like your bloody corpse collapsed to the ground.”

“But you still believed in me. That made me happy.”

“Well, yeah, I had to after that ominous callback you did!” Subaru jabbed Reinhard’s shoulder lightheartedly while grumbling. “So then, what was it? It wasn’t a clone or some substitution technique, right? That was a serious fire, too. Don’t tell me you’re a ninja on top of being a knight.”

“As it happens, I have not received training as a *shinobi*. That was because of the blessing of the phoenix, which allows me to be revived from a single death. Hence the flashy manner of the resurrection. Your description is more or less correct. I was dead for a moment there.”

“Don’t give me that ‘dead for a moment’ spiel! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Subaru couldn’t help exclaiming at that ridiculous reply.

What sort of blessing allows someone to die once? What do they think death means? Subaru didn’t think it was really his place to say something like that, but if nothing else, he was the only one who could say it.

“Just how much more of my thunder do you have to steal…?”

“—? My apologies. However, I judged that that was the best method of catching our opponent off guard. And it was successful. Though, if possible, I would prefer to not die a second time.”

“But it’s a fact that you died to save me, right? I can’t help feeling *really* guilty…”

“Guh.”

“Why do you look so upset, Subaru?”

Subaru groaned and grabbed his chest after sustaining a completely unexpected blow. Shifting gears, he glanced at the young blond woman who had slumped over behind him and then at all the other people around them.

"From what you were saying before, are all these people…?"

"Yes, they're Regulus's wives…though I *really* don't want to accept it."

Emilia's beautiful eyebrows arched, and her expression clouded. Subaru could more or less grasp what she wanted to say.

"I can't imagine they were super happy, judging from their reactions."

It was plain to see how Regulus usually treated his wives based on his failed threats. The women were beautiful, but just looking at them was heartbreaking.

Subaru was surprised to find he could get even angrier with Regulus. How hated did the Archbishops have to become before they would be satisfied?

As that endless rage smoldered—

"—Subaru."

"I know."

Subaru nodded as Reinhard called to him. The two of them put on serious faces as they turned around. Emilia's violet eyes widened when she looked in the same direction.

"I can't help but wonder what are you thinking, acting so cheerful after treating me so outrageously? There should be a limit to how morally bankrupt a person can be. Or do you see this as nothing more than stepping on an insect crawling around the ground? Was that violent outburst the equivalent of squashing an ant to you? How am I supposed to feel about that?!"

The villain stared down at the three of them from the pile of rubble that had collected at the base of the shattered chapel wall. His words made it clear he had lost his temper as he leaped toward them.

When he landed on the ground nearby, he calmly adjusted the collar of his white suit and his unwrinkled sleeves before brushing off the matching white pants and elegantly fixing his hair.

He had taken the brunt of Reinhard's attack, but there wasn't a single trace of dirt on his immaculate outfit.

"I see. He is a rather odd one, just like you mentioned, Subaru."

"Do you mean me? Would you mind correcting that for the record? Don't refer to me by such an imbecilic and crude description."

Open annoyance appeared on Regulus's face as he glared at Reinhard. And as if to emphasize his untouched clothes, he spread his legs and thrust out his chest.

"I am Regulus Corneas, the Witch Cult Archbishop of Greed—the most fully realized and most content man in the world. You would do well to remember that, you good-for-nothings."

"…You guys are always so diligent about these introductions. Is that part of the cult's training for new hires?"

Subaru's shoulders slumped in exasperation at hearing the same spiel every time he met another Archbishop. Beside him, Emilia pointedly murmured, "Witch Cult…Greed…"

Emilia put her finger to her lips, seemingly deep in thought.

"Regulus…have I met you somewhere before?"

"Ha? What? Not that I know of. You aren't going to spout something about a fateful encounter now, are you? Save me that foolishness. No matter how pretty the face, a latent potential for infidelity is irredeemable! Such a wanton woman could neve—Ngh!"

"Blah, blah, blah! Shut up already! No one cares!"

Subaru mercilessly cracked his whip, hitting Regulus in the face and interrupting his rant. Regulus's head twisted from the force of the blow, but as he slowly turned his face back, the strike had left no mark at all.

"…We're not gonna get anywhere until we figure out the trick to that invincibility."

"Quit acting all high-and-mighty, you twit. You just signed your death warrant with that. You will pay for what you've done."

"Unfortunately, your opponent is me. I'm afraid you'll have to let me stall for time."

In the blink of an eye, Reinhard's kick sent Regulus flying backward with incredible force. Regulus let out a "gah!" as he skidded off the ground without breaking his fall before crashing directly into the mound of rubble. The mound collapsed as he passed all the way through it and out the other side.

"All right, I shall face him as we planned. You work on figuring out his invincibility, Subaru."

Reinhard slowly lowered his long leg as Subaru nodded.

"Sure. Stalling for time is fine and all…but no one's going to complain if you happen to beat him, either."

"If possible, I would like to do so. Also…get the women to safety. This is about to turn into a battlefield."

"Wait, Reinhard! It might not be that much use, but here!"

Emilia stopped Reinhard as he casually prepared to face the enemy. She held out another sword of ice she had made with her magic.

"—Many thanks."

Taking the sword, Reinhard politely bowed to her.

Facing forward again, he leaped out of the chapel after Regulus. He disappeared from view in the blink of an eye. A split second later, the wind he kicked up tousled their hair.

The shouts and crashes that erupted outside right after signaled that the battle had begun.

"All right. Now's our chance, Emilia-tan! Like Reinhard said, we need to get everyone here to safety! They all, wait…are they even going to listen?"

Subaru turned around in high spirits, but he was at a loss when he saw all those women.

The events of the past few minutes should have been shock after shock, but there was not even a trace of emotion in their blank expressions. Even though Reinhard had just died once in front of their eyes.

"Are you all right? You aren't hurt anywhere, are you?" Emilia shook the shoulders of the woman who had slumped to the carpet. The one Subaru had saved with his whip slowly looked up as Emilia earnestly called out to her. Emilia's figure was reflected in her blue eyes. "Mm, you seem all right. Can you stand? Let's get out of here right away. And everyone else, too…"

"I…*we* are staying here. If you want to run away by yourself, then please do so."

"—But why? Did you hurt your leg? If you did, then just lean on my shoulder! It's dangerous here! I made a wall of ice, but that's not enough to be saf—"

"—Our husband has not given his permission."

The woman's hideously emotionless voice interrupted Emilia's earnest plea.

Emilia was speechless as the woman looked at her with a clear, penetrating gaze.

"Acting without his permission will upset him."

"That's… We are going to—"

Emilia wanted to give her assurances that they would deal with Regulus. But she found it impossible to say when under that blond woman's gaze.

"The guy fighting Regulus right now is the Sword Saint Reinhard," Subaru said, cutting in brusquely. "I totally understand why you're scared of Regulus, but trust me, Reinhard's going to kick his ass. So could you listen to us?"

"Defeat him? Please don't make me laugh. It does not matter who the opponent is. There is no one who can match him… No one can best Regulus Corneas."

She snorted at Subaru, refusing to be saved.

That scoff was the first sign of anything that even approached emotion. And it was the sort of laugh an adult might have for a sheltered child spouting fairy tales that always end happily ever after.

—It was indescribably twisted how Regulus's wives believed their husband's strength was absolute.

It was an unwavering faith completely unaffected by the fact that he was facing the Sword Saint Reinhard. An unbreakable curse binding them. Regulus had tied down his wives with his incomparable strength.

They knew beyond a doubt that their husband would emerge victorious, giving him an unbreakable hold on their hearts—the marital ideal in one twisted, warped sense of the idea.

"I guess that's what it might look like at a glance. This is some shit…!"

Regulus's wives couldn't be convinced. That much was painfully obvious. There was no way to save them through words alone.

What this one woman had said was clearly a belief shared by all the other wives there. The fact that not a single one of them expressed any objection or attempted to move at all was proof of that.

It seemed very much like the only way to get them out of there would be to physically carry them away.

"This is impossible! Reinhard! Change of plans!"

Giving up on trying to convince them, Subaru ran up the rubble pile near where the altar had stood to go find the lead actor in the inhuman battle unfolding outside. When he reached the summit and looked out on the battlefield, he couldn't help but say, "Oh, come on! Could you maybe moderate yourself a bit?!"

As twilight started to fall on the streets, Regulus's childlike temper erupted. The white-haired villain swung his arm with wild abandon, explosively tearing up the pavement and toppling a building. A wave of destruction turned the beautiful neighborhood to rubble.

"How selfish can that idiot be…? Whoa! The heck?!"

Regulus's uncontrolled violence sent pieces of rubble and rock flying like stray bullets. Subaru took cover and shielded his head as he searched for Reinhard.

At that moment, Reinhard was in the process of running straight up the wall of a tower into the night sky. Subaru's eyes bulged at that gravity-defying stunt as he suddenly heard something.

"Change of plans? What about the women inside?"

"?! What?! Where is your voice coming from?!"

"This is the blessing of telepathy. It allows my voice to reach any visible friends."

"You're getting less human every single day! Also, something's been flying around me?! Whoa! I can't hear anything over the wind!"

"Ah, understood—I'll put an end to that right now."

Reinhard launched himself off the wall, crossing in front of the moon. Clearing the tower just as it was pummeled by Regulus, Reinhard accelerated as he descended in a high-speed spin. The moment he touched down, he used his spinning leg to unleash an aerial slash.

"Wh-what are you—?!"

Regulus roared as he was sent flying yet again by that attack. Subaru blinked as he watched the building behind Regulus collapse after he slammed into it.

"What was that acrobatic assassination technique just now?"

"It seems like he's using pebbles and small rubble as missiles. In order to defend against it, I had to counter with a blade of air, since it'd be impossible to evade all the flying debris."

"That sounds a lot like dodging rain, and I'm not sure how it makes me feel."

Putting one and one together, Subaru realized that the noise he'd been hearing was the sound of Reinhard protecting him from Regulus's attacks.

"Anyway, that's not important right now! We need a new plan! Those people inside won't move! They're too scared of Regulus!"

"…That's understandable. That means—"

"We're going with plan W!"

Recalling what they had discussed beforehand, Reinhard's blue eyes narrowed as he advanced. Regulus emerged from the collapsed building and watched them as he brushed himself off.

"You've been having your way quite a bit for a while now. You seem to possess a rather absurd amount of strength, but if you only have half a brain, then it's all just wasted. Most people would have realized by now that whether you punch or kick me, it's meaningless!"

"True, I've tried almost everything, and it seems straightforward attacks aren't having any effect. That means I'll have to start trying methods that are a bit more indirect!"

Regulus's face clouded in an evil rage as Reinhard sped up.

Seeing that and finally changing up his response, Regulus swung one arm horizontally and the other vertically at the same time. The waves of destruction following each swing simultaneously closed in on Reinhard.

In response, Reinhard moved so fast that Subaru couldn't follow with his eyes, and he evaded the invisible attack. If he had to describe the move, it looked like Reinhard was in sixteen different places at the same time.

Now that he had closed the distance, Reinhard swung Emilia's ice blade that he had been preserving, driving it up into Regulus's body from the ground and sending Regulus into the air with a clean hit.

The villain's cries and the sound of the ice blade rang out at the same time as the battle shifted to a new location.

"Subaru! Wait, what are you doing?" Emilia called out.

"We're going to lure him, and then… Whoa, that's a bold look, Emilia-tan!"

"I mean, this dress is cute, but it's hard to move in…"

Emilia had climbed up the mound of rubble after Subaru, who couldn't help but stare at her appearance.

The white wedding dress was now sporting a massive tear. She had torn a leg slit for better freedom of movement. This made it easier to fight, but the pale skin of her leg was visible, and Subaru found it incredibly alluring.

"For some reason, that skirt alteration with this particular outfit seems more risqué than normal…"

"Who cares about that right now?! What did you ask Reinhard to do?"

"He's carrying out one of the plans we went over before we got here. We have to figure out the trick to that guy's invincibility, so we came up with tests to check every possibility I could imagine."

With a nod to Emilia, Subaru went to the corner of the chapel to pick up the white Dragon Sword Reinhard had left with him and then started heading outside.

Just before leaving, he looked around at Regulus's wives one last time.

"Regulus is the bad guy here, so I'm not going to blame you for anything. But I will say one thing."

"

And the redheaded Sword Saint, who had been the target of that scattershot attack, catapulted himself off what should have been empty space and soared upward, hurtling directly at Regulus with a physics-defying move.

"You little…! Stop flitting all around like an insect!"

Reinhard lived in a realm beyond common sense, and not even a seasoned warrior could keep up with his movements. For Regulus, who was little more than an amateur when it came to the technical aspects of combat, catching Reinhard was impossible. Moving instinctively, he threw handfuls of dirt haphazardly in every direction.

"What are youuuuu?!"

"Knight to Lady Felt, the royal candidate. I hope you will consider supporting her bid to become the next ruler."

"—?!"

Regulus's eyes frantically scanned his surroundings, searching for the enemy as he listened to the strangely earnest advertisement. Meanwhile, Reinhard hefted the metal object in his hands and swung straight at the back of Regulus's head. There was a *crash* as the metal bent at the base and became useless as a weapon after a single blow.

"You…!"

"So the element of surprise and attacking from your blind spot doesn't work, either? It seems the conditions are different from my blessings."

Reinhard made these comments as Regulus showed no sign of having taken any damage from that blow.

Deciphering the conditions that defined Regulus's invincibility was of the utmost importance. Fortunately, he couldn't keep up with Reinhard's movements, but Reinhard couldn't keep fighting forever, either. Eventually, he would run out of steam.

"You must realize by now you have no way of winning, right? That violence of yours may have carried the day countless times before, but this is the limit for those whose happiness is built atop the sacrifices of others! How many people's feelings have you trampled on, you hideous, greedy monster?!"

"Your words cut surprisingly deep. That said, I am not oblivious to the truth."

Regulus's words were nonsensical, but Reinhard still averted his eyes in shame.

"Huh? What is that supposed to mean? Are you saying I should just let bygones be bygones because you acknowledge your sins? Have some perspective, you narcissist. No one has their hopes riding on some future where anything actually comes of your self-reflection. All that matters is the past and the present. Your remorse does nothing for all the people who had to lick your boots as you crushed them underfoot! Cursed villain! Die, hypocrite!"

"…Talking with you feels like looking deep into a mirror at myself. I understand now why Subaru said not to listen to you."

"Pretentious little… Ah yes. His name is Subaru, right! The villain who stole my bride from me! I can't forgive him or that wanton woman. I'll have to make them pa— Gagh?!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Regulus's jaw slammed closed as he flipped head over heels.

Reinhard had closed the distance between them in a flash and thrust the heel of his palm straight into Regulus's chin. Then Reinhard grabbed the Archbishop's leg while his victim was still airborne and swung him into the pavement before shoving the man's head against the floor and using it to level out the ground around him.

"What?! You're fine but your friend is off-limits? Your performative chivalry is nauseating!"

Regulus glared viciously at Reinhard even as his upper body was used to plow the street.

"I lent you an ear long enough. I can't bear listening anymore. Particularly not when you slander my friend," Reinhard said with a smile as he leaped high into the air. The two of them rose into the night sky where the wind whipped around them, and the bright full moon filled their vision in a moment of weightlessness. Regulus scoffed as the moon grew so large, it almost seemed like it was within reach.

"When will you get it through your thick skull?! It's not a question of power. It is juvenile to think that dropping me from a great height will be enough to change anything. Are you a fool, or do you just take me for a fool?"

"If destructive force were enough to settle things, then I suppose I could try smashing you into a crack in the ground…but I had something else in mind. Humor me for a moment."

As he said that, Reinhard deftly adjusted his position while in midair with nothing to support him. And then he twisted the arm holding Regulus's head.

"What…?"

The villain's eyes opened wide. Seeing the scene below them, Regulus roared.

"This is preposterouuuuus!"

"For now, the first of the novel variants. Pray that we need not move on to a second."

It was a rare display of sarcasm from Reinhard, but Regulus didn't have the composure to appreciate or respond.

Using nothing but his arm strength, Reinhard swung Regulus's body and threw it straight down with tremendous speed. His supple, whiplike movement sent Regulus toward the water's surface below.

On the way down, Regulus struggled in vain, flailing his arms and legs. "As if a little dip in the water would…" He held his arms out in front of him, preparing for the shock of hitting the surface. Reinhard was just as helpless in midair, but they had planned for that.

"—Now, Emilia-tan!"

"*Ul Hyuma*!"

Regulus heard the annoying voices of a man and woman, then caught a glimpse of them both from the corner of his eye—the black-haired boy pointing at him and the silver-haired girl casting something.

An instant later, as Regulus was still falling down, a gigantic icicle crashed into him from above.

This was only just the beginning as more and more icicles began pummeling his back. His arms, legs, and torso were fully encased in ice by the time he fell into the canal, plunging beneath the surface with a massive splash.

"

have been possible.

Of course, the true problem was that this plan required someone who could effectively fly.

"But it worked out in the end. Thanks to your plan, Subaru, and what little assistance I was able to provide. Lady Emilia's strength was extremely helpful as well."

"Don't read people's minds like that. Still, though, we went straight for a cheese strat after all…"

Looking out across the frozen surface, Subaru made sure to not let his guard down, watching carefully for any signs of Regulus. But next to him, Emilia lowered her eyes set off by long eyelashes.

"I don't think there's any hope after falling into the water like that…"

"Sorry, when you're feeling a bit down about all this, Emilia-tan, but honestly, I'd be perfectly happy if this was the end of that guy. I think we can count ourselves lucky if all we have to deal with is feeling guilty about ganging up on someone and drowning them."

Deep down, Subaru didn't relish the idea of killing anyone. Even if he was dealing with someone who was an immediate threat, he had learned his lesson about what terrible things can come from acting on a desire for revenge.

"When everything's said and done…"

Archbishops were the only exception. He couldn't bring himself to let them go. Not because they were powerful enemies. It was because they were villainous, vulgar, vile, repulsive, wicked, heinous, violent, sinful, crude, evil, and every other kind of nasty thing imaginable.

"—Watch out!"

As soon as he heard that shouted warning, the surface of the water broke. Then Subaru felt himself floating.

The reason was Reinhard, who had leaped backward while holding Subaru and Emilia. The next instant, a spray of water from the canal rained down on where they had been standing. The road was shredded.

The aftermath was identical to the pockmarks left behind by the storms of dirt being thrown around earlier.

"It seems that dropping him into the depths while encased in ice wasn't enough to conclude this battle."

"…Looks like it. But, man, I didn't realize that attack works with stuff other than dirt."

Reinhard and Subaru were both talking about the same person, but different things had caught their attention.

Subaru noted how this time it was water droplets instead of clumps of dirt that had torn into the ground. And Reinhard was focused on the figure now standing atop the floating ice—

"…There isn't any ice on his body. Just like before in the chapel."

Emilia was also looking at Regulus Corneas standing atop the ice floe.

His arms, legs, and torso had been fully encased in ice before he had plunged deep into the water, but Regulus had returned to the surface alive. And as she had noted, there wasn't a single mark anywhere on his body.

Reinhard's physical attacks, Emilia's magic, and even the water—none of them had any visible effect.

This wasn't some enhanced defensive ability. Regulus had a power that was fundamentally different. Subaru still wasn't sure how it worked yet, but it seemed unlikely his body was completely covered by some sort of absolute defense field. Part of the goal of plan W had been to see if they could find a hole in that defense.

"He's not even wet, so that rules out it being some kind of invisible box…"

"This is the price I pay for being so easygoing."

Subaru's body tensed as he sensed a dangerous omen from the quiet voice that rang out. Regulus pierced him with a chilling stare. Standing atop the ice floe, unharmed and still dry, the villain's lips twisted as he proceeded to castigate them.

"You don't get it. You just don't get it at all. It's pointless. You have no hope of winning. You can't touch me. It's meaningless. Why are you so slow to realize it? I've explained it. I've demonstrated it. And yet, you still don't understand?"

Regulus muttered in annoyance as he walked along the ice toward them. And as he stepped off the ice partway, Subaru's eyes widened.

"What? Have you finally managed to grasp an inkling of exactly who you are dealing with?"

Regulus's malevolent eyes flashed as he casually walked across the top of the water. There wasn't any ice where he stepped. He simply crossed the waves churning the water's surface.

Was that also made possible by his power? What sort of amazing gift combined invincibility with the ability to walk across water?

"—Subaru, my sword."

"Huh? O-oh, right…"

As Regulus continued his ominous approach, Subaru handed Reinhard the Dragon Sword he had been safekeeping. As he confirmed the feel of his trusted sword, Emilia looked at him and asked a pointed question.

"Is the sword coming out?"

"No, it refuses to budge. However, whatever the sword thinks, I believe he is a dangerous opponent."

Reinhard had updated his assessment of how great a threat Regulus posed after their exchanges thus far. However, Subaru couldn't fathom what Reinhard was thinking as he wielded a sword he couldn't draw.

"What are you going to do if you can't draw it? Just swing it while it's still in its sheath?"

"Come on, Emilia-tan—that's a bit too simplistic…"

"Yes, that's correct, Lady Emilia."

"Say what?!"

Reinhard confirmed he intended to do exactly what Emilia had guessed. Emilia accepted that response as if it was perfectly natural, but Subaru wasn't sure how to feel.

From time to time, the strongest people in this world seemed perfectly happy resorting to brute force and turning their overwhelming strength into a weapon. They all seemed to think that there was no need for subtle moves and tricks when they already possessed the strongest attack.

But Archbishops were not the sort of people who could be faced with just a straightforward attack—

"Subaru, you and Emilia focus on figuring out the secret to his ability!"

With that parting message, Reinhard charged forward, using the wind itself as a springboard. Regulus wore a sinister sneer as he extended his hands toward the surface, touching his fingers to the water.

"You just don't get it, do you?! The world will be a better place without a fool like you in it!"

With that arrogant proclamation, Regulus swung his arms up, creating a big spray of water droplets—child's play transformed into a murderous barrage meant to slay a hero. As the world's most dangerous splash of water closed in, Reinhard gripped the Dragon Sword tightly and boldly pressed forward.

In an instant, the world around Reinhard was engulfed and annihilated by the droplets. Subaru was speechless as he watched the sheer destruction that reshaped the landscape before his very eyes. But Emilia squeezed his tense hand.

"It's okay."

That was enough to assure him that Reinhard was still safe even if it seemed all but impossible. And sure enough, Reinhard emerged in one piece, still shooting right at Regulus.

The Sword Saint's and villain's gazes crossed as Regulus heaved a heartfelt sigh of irritation.

"It never ends. You really are lacking for imagination."

"In my Lady's words, focus on looking for change on the ground and forget about looking up."

Reinhard lashed out with word and sword alike.

Just as he had said, he was swinging the Dragon Sword, sheath and all. A storm of blows fell upon Regulus. Heavy impacts rang out in quick succession, and the scene that unfolded almost looked like a young kid playing with a doll, a strange continuation of the childish water splashing from before.

But just as Regulus's splashes were actually the destructive manifestations of raw violence, Reinhard's swordplay revealed an inhuman level of martial prowess—each and every blow would have been strong enough to end a fight against any other opponent. The scene beggared belief and defied description.

And on top of that, something had changed in a way that was terribly ominous—

"He's stopped getting knocked back when he gets hit."

Even as Subaru watched, Regulus took a hit to his temple, but his face didn't whip to the side as expected. He simply brushed his hand at it as if shooing away a bug. Reinhard's blows were landing, but Regulus had stopped experiencing any sort of impact.

At some point, Reinhard had also started standing on top of the water like Regulus as their fight continued. Their superhuman clash went back and forth. Perhaps it was more accurately described as a deadlock.

That gave Subaru a bad feeling. Nothing good would come if their progress was stalled without any clues to develop a new hypothesis.

It wasn't long before his premonition came true.

"—What?"

Reinhard had challenged Regulus at extremely close quarters. Just as he stepped forward with his left leg before his right could start to sink, he suddenly stopped. Or rather, he was stopped. He staggered, and the careful balance was shattered.

Reinhard's right leg exploded below the knee, scattering crimson across the water's surface.

"He got hit?! By what?!"

Reinhard's brow furrowed in pain as Subaru shouted.

Neither Subaru nor Emilia nor Reinhard himself understood what had just happened. The answer came from the one who had laid down the gauntlet.

"You have a monstrous ability to evade, dodging even dirt and water droplets, but you're too naive. If you truly intend to challenge me, you must stay ever vigilant. Even my breath requires caution. Sighs are no exception."

Regulus provided an unexpected explanation as he swung his leg upward with little finesse. Reinhard had lost his footing and had no way to evade the bottom of Regulus's fast-approaching shoe.

This Archbishop could turn bits of dirt and even water droplets into deadly weapons. It wouldn't be surprising if a direct attack from him transformed his victim into shapeless gore.

Reinhard immediately blocked the kick with the sheath of the Dragon Sword, but—

"Gh…!"

"What is that annoying sword made of? And it's absurd that it can't be drawn, either. That's what you call living beyond your means. Not that I can understand what that feels like!"

A shock wave shot out, creating a ripple centered around them on the water's surface. An instant later, the water exploded and sent Reinhard flying.

He hurtled away at incredible speed, like a rubber ball that had hit the limit of its elasticity.

The kick contained enough force to gouge the road and blow away the whole canal. All that energy had been imparted to Reinhard.

"No! Stop— Gh!"

Emilia held out her hand, mana surging as she tried to catch

Reinhard. Walls of ice spawned one after the other along his trajectory as Emilia tried to slow him down somehow. But the instant Reinhard made contact with one of the walls, he left a human-shaped hole in the ice and kept going.

"—Eh?"

Emilia was speechless.

Reinhard's body crashed into the next one, but he passed straight through it as well. He soared through the walls of solid ice like he was going through a door made of paper.

There was no way to stop him. He careened into buildings, destroying them as he continued spinning uncontrollably until he disappeared from sight.

"…All right. Finally, the most annoying one has been taken care of."

Already losing his interest in Reinhard, Regulus turned his attention back to Subaru and Emilia.

Subaru's body went rigid as the man's malicious glare fell on him. Emilia's expression tensed as well. Countless icicles formed in the air, pointing at their foe.

"…Dear me. Dim-witted women really are such a handful. They take so much effort to discipline. Well, all women are slow on the uptake and struggle to learn. That's exactly why you have to start by teaching them their place. But they aren't so bad once you break them in."

"Eiya!"

"…You just don't listen to people, do you?"

The icicles crashed into Regulus as he kept saying whatever came to mind. The barrage had struck home the moment Emilia had shouted. But it had no effect. The ice crumbled wherever it hit Regulus's body and fell into the water. He spread his arms as he cried out.

"Everything you do is pointless! I am a perfect, complete person! There is nothing more and nothing less for one as fulfilled as I! I am the one and only who has achieved eternity!"

"You aren't fulfilled—you're just a big liar! All you ever talk about is want, want, want! You're just *really* selfish."

"—What?"

"If you were actually fulfilled, then you would take better care of your wives! Not tie them down and make them give up on life and—and then…"

Emilia's violet eyes flared as she upbraided Regulus, who stood there unflinching. It was not uncommon for Emilia to resort to emotional arguments, but she hardly let such intense feelings come to the surface.

And then, as if finally finding the words for what she wanted to say, she screamed, "I get it—I hate you!"

"You harlooooot!"

"Don't give me that! I'm the one who should be angry! I can't take it anymore!"

Emilia's face was a mask of fury as she glared at Regulus, who also erupted in rage. Subaru found her display satisfying and refreshing, but he was mostly worried about getting that villain riled up.

"Well said, Emilia-tan! I wouldn't have put it any other way, but maybe reel it back for a second!"

"But he's so—!"

"We can't beat him without figuring what his ability does! I'm also worried about Reinhard, so we can't afford to forget our priorities."

Pulling Emilia's arm as she erupted in righteous fury, Subaru tried to persuade her that their top concern was to regroup with Reinhard.

Put bluntly, they needed Reinhard to defeat Regulus. And even for Reinhard, seeing him get blown away so violently made Subaru fear the worst.

Emilia seemed unsure for a moment, but she quickly smothered the rage blazing in her breast and started running with Subaru to quickly distance themselves from Regulus.

Though Subaru expected the Archbishop to give chase in a fit of rage…

"

and was taken completely by surprise. Emilia noticed his agitation, and when she turned to look, her eyes grew wide.

"H-hey, Subaru…I have a *really* bad feeling about this."

"What a coincidence. I just had the same feeling."

After an exchange that was not enough to relax them, they immediately picked up the speed. They didn't understand what was unfolding behind them, but they knew it couldn't be anything good.

Standing on the edge of the canal, Regulus slowly raised his arm. His five fingers clutched a massive blob—a solidified mass of water from the canal.

Like ice made by a machine, he had somehow extracted a uniform cube of water. It was an enormous amount of liquid, enough to fill an entire twenty-five-yard pool. At a glance, it didn't seem frozen. It no longer acted like a liquid, transcending that state of matter.

"Oh, you're running? So that's your reaction? I suppose that's fine. Considering the difference in strength, that's the natural thing to do. I can respect that. However…" As soon as he trailed off, Regulus casually jumped. The speed and distance he traveled were totally abnormal. Flying through the air like an arrow, Regulus landed on the time tower standing over the city's third district.

The sarcastic thought that Archbishops really seemed to like high places came to mind, but Subaru didn't have the opportunity or composure to voice it. He could already imagine what was coming next.

They were far apart. Regulus's face was a small dot in the distance. But somehow, he could still see that sinister smirk.

"If you think you can get away, then try as hard as you can. A woman unworthy to be my bride and the shameless adulterer who so desperately wishes to run off with her. Allow me to offer you a rain of redemption!"

Regulus roared as the mass of water he was holding above his head slowly came apart bit by bit before bursting all at once with dreadful force. The inertia was so great that the water droplets seemed like they chased after Subaru and Emilia running in the distance, tearing apart the buildings and streets in between, breaking and shattering everything as the wave of destruction came closer.

"Subaru!"

"Run, run, run, run, run, run, ruuuuuun!!!"

The town was engulfed by a murderous rain that obliterated everything in its path. It was like the city was getting carpet-bombed, and the two of them had nowhere to hide.

4

Annihilation was close at hand.

The water pouring down should have been fleeting, transient little things that left a light mark on a dry road before disappearing. Instead, each and every droplet had transformed into a harbinger of doom that inundated the city.

The drops of water tore through whatever they encountered like knives through paper. Buildings collapsed and roads broke apart as the destruction spread, ruining more and more of the city.

"Oooooooh!"

As the devastation approached from behind, Subaru screamed as he kept sprinting with all his might. Running next to him, Emilia's mouth was shut tight as she also sprinted as hard as she could, her silver hair trailing behind her.

However, the picturesque city of water had canals crisscrossing its entire length. Because of that, the roads tended to twist and wind, making it difficult to just keep running in one direction. Before long, another canal blocked their way. They didn't have time to be taking a detour, but—

"Crap!"

"I'm not sure if this will work, but…Subaru, grab on!"

Emilia held out her hand. He didn't hesitate, and as soon as he grabbed on, a chill touched the air around them.

An enormous amount of mana swirled inside Emilia, and a faint, flickering light enveloped the two of them.

These were the signs of a duet of Emilia's own magic and the power of the lesser spirits whose strength she was borrowing.

"—Please, everyone!"

The lesser spirits gave off dazzling light as they responded to Emilia's prayer.

The ground they were running on suddenly turned white as the world around them turned silver. Pulling the shocked Subaru behind her, Emilia accelerated straight toward the waterway.

"Eeeey!" "Waaaah?!"

Subaru shouted in shock as they plunged into the canal without warning. But Emilia's plan went beyond what he had imagined in their moment of crisis.

"Whooooa! You're amazing, Emilia-tan! So smart! And so cute!"

"Stop messing around! It's hard to control, so don't let go!"

Squeezing Emilia's hand, Subaru focused on running—because they were currently speeding across the slippery surface of the now frozen-over canal. They had managed to maintain their speed while continuing on a direct escape path.

Between her own magic and the lesser spirits' power, Emilia had managed to freeze the water's surface and create a path. Though slipping and sliding, they continued their high-speed escape.

They maintained a good speed, but Subaru found it hard to keep his balance. He held Emilia's hand tight.

"Emilia-tan! Make some ice skates! A blade on the bottom of a shoe…something sharp to slide over the top of the ice."

"Skate…? Ah! If you mean shoes for gliding across ice, I've seen those before! I think it was like…this!"

As they continued to slide along, Emilia envisioned the object and used her magic to encase their feet in ice, instantly creating a set of ice skates.

Icebrand Arts was something Subaru had taught Emilia, a magical technique that allowed her to create all sorts of things with ice that she could freely control in a fight.

Making it practical for real combat had required a lot of time working on image training together. That practiced communication was what enabled her to create ice skates so quickly.

"All right, now we can move more freely! With this…"

"Every once in a while, there are people like you who mistakenly think they are special."

Testing the edge of the blades, Subaru sped up just as a persistent voice filled his ears.

Inhaling sharply, he turned around and found Regulus chasing after them, walking on the frozen waterway they were skating on, ice cracking underneath him with every step.

"Do you think some on-the-spot improvisation is going to be the key to victory? Isn't it rather conceited to start believing you're exceptional after one harebrained idea? Isn't that just simple arrogance? It spits in the face of people who are content in moderation and understanding of their place in life, like me."

That harmless but pointless comment aside, Subaru was certain things were going very badly.

Regulus was walking leisurely, but his speed didn't match his posture at all. The acceleration he gained from each step was almost ridiculous, and he was quickly catching up even though Subaru and Emilia were skating at full speed down the ice.

"Argh, this dude makes me wanna hurl!"

"Subaru, can you manage if I leave one of the lesser spirits with you?!"

While Subaru had all attention on their pursuer, Emilia held out a lesser spirit in the palm of her hand. Subaru arched his eyebrows in confusion for a split second, but he quickly nodded.

"Yeah, leave it to me! I may look like this now, but they didn't call me Princess of the Ice for nothing back when I was a kid!"

"Sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Subaru was referencing a story from his early childhood, when he had been an adorable, long-haired kid. As that went over Emilia's head, she smiled as she let go of his hand and turned around. Maintaining her speed, she started skating in the other direction and pointed her palms toward Regulus.

"Please! Let this hit!"

Blades and spears of ice, along with whole chunks of the stuff, pummeled Regulus from every direction. Unfortunately, they all shattered the moment they came into contact with his body, dealing no damage.

Meanwhile, the Archbishop didn't slow down at all, meaning they couldn't afford to slow down, either.

"Come on, Mr. Lesser Spirit! Miss? Sorry I don't know your pronouns, but I'm countin' on you!"

Pleading with the lesser spirit Emilia had left with him, Subaru prioritized extending the path of ice over the water. It was do-or-die for him while Emilia was busy dealing with Regulus.

"Ey! Ya! Uryah!"

Fully trusting Subaru, Emilia focused all her attention on Regulus.

She had no experience skating, but she overcame that with her natural sense of balance, skillfully accelerating and slowing down as needed in order to set up her attacks.

Twin ice blades crashed against Regulus's neck while an ice hammer slammed into his torso. Ice lances hurtled toward his vital points one after the other, and a flash of blue magic froze his upper body.

However, he just calmly walked through Emilia's assault as if sneering at all of it in disdain.

"You know, pointless resistance is essentially a form of defamation. Someone has utterly overwhelming strength after all, and yet their opponent refuses to acknowledge it. Pointless resistance is not something that should be done. It's equivalent to denying an opponent's strength, the fruits of all their labors, as well as their innate talent. It's a sign of a lack of consideration for an opponent. That's a violation of my simple right to be myself—"

"What about this?!"

As Regulus sneered, Emilia unleashed a three-part staff that swung straight up into his crotch. The impact was so powerful that even Subaru grimaced, but unfortunately, Regulus sustained no visible damage.

However, even if there was no physical damage, it was clear from his face that it had dealt a serious psychological blow. His cheeks tensed, and his white eyebrows arched as he glared at Emilia.

"You don't even know the meaning of discretion, do you, woman?! After aiming for my vitals this whole time, now this? Have you no shame? You're a disgrace as a woman! And utterly unfit to be a bride!"

"I already told you! I'm not going to be your bride! I wouldn't be able to smile anymore!"

Regulus reached out his hand, his anger on full display, but Emilia eluded his reach at the last moment.

She moved with the grace of a figure skater, her beautiful technique worthy of the title ice fairy. As she sped along in her boldly torn dress, she continued to lead the villain around by the nose.

"Smile? My wives don't need to smile! What I love is their faces! It's only natural to wish for a situation where the person you love can love you back. Don't trifle with me, you evil woman!"

"Whether they're laughing or angry or crying or even just sleeping, they are still the same person! You're the only evil one here!"

The girl in the white dress and the man in the white suit clashed in a fierce argument atop the ice.

To anyone watching from above, it probably would've seemed like two newlyweds. But in reality, this was a forced marriage, and the two people atop the ice were a girl who possessed the peerless beauty of an ice fairy and an Archbishop of the Witch Cult who embodied the viciousness of the world.

Dancing, skating, accelerating, bending backward, spinning, slowing, flipping through the air—Emilia was traversing the ice like she was performing a carefully choreographed routine. And just when Regulus's patience ran out and he prepared to leap at her—

"—Emilia-tan!" "Wha—?!"

Subaru used his whip to pull her slender frame toward him in one big motion. And unable to make the curve as the canal merged into another one, Regulus passed right by the two of them and slammed headfirst into the wall.

Meanwhile, Subaru had used a curving ice wall made by the lesser spirit in order to take the turn while helping Emilia maneuver by using the whip and catching her as she spun into him at high speed. It turned out perfectly so that he was hugging Emilia from behind as the two of them skated farther down the canal.

"Thanks, Subaru. That saved me."

"Don't worry about it, just one of the perks! More importantly, plans V (Vitals) and B (Balls) are no good, either. Is the whole Siegfried, single-weak-point pattern just not a thing?! What in the world is his weakness?!"

"Just accept that I don't have a weakness already!"

Right after Subaru shouted in frustration, an angry roar answered as a pillar of water erupted from the intersection as if a giant beast had come crashing through. And tearing through the waterfall, seemingly ignoring all laws of physics, Regulus shot straight toward them.

Regulus's passing caused shock waves wherever he stepped, setting off explosions of water all along the canal. The amount of water in the great canal was high from the sluice gates having been opened once already, and it contributed to the growing destruction of the streets and buildings all around Regulus as the water shot away from him.

"Not good! He's going to catch up!"

"Hold me tight, Subaru."

"Eh? I'd do that even if you didn't ask, but what are you planning to do?!"

"This!"

Subaru grabbed on to her waist as instructed. Leaning her body against him, Emilia created an icicle above their heads and let it fly straight behind them.

Her aim was down the path they were taking, away from Regulus. Subaru furrowed his brow in confusion, but—

"Catch it!"

"—! Oh!"

Understanding her idea, he swung his whip and wrapped it around the icicle quickly moving away from them. The force of it was too great for him to stop it. But that was fine.

"Uwhooooooa!"

Pulled along by the ice flying through the air, Subaru and Emilia suddenly peeled away.

At that speed, the lesser spirit couldn't keep up, and the half-frozen water kicked up a spray as they passed. It was almost like the waterskiing Subaru had seen on TV once.

The main difference was that the ice flying through the air around them was patently unsafe. If he loosened his grip on the whip even a little, they would immediately have to go for a swim.

"This is…tough to…balance…! And…!"

"The magic won't just keep flying forever. So here! The next! Here!"

"Even if you say that—I mean, I'll try!"

The icicle had already started to lose momentum, but just before they sank beneath the surface, Emilia created a new one. Freeing his whip, Subaru sent it flying to the new rocketing hunk of ice, repeating the process.

Catching the icicle, switching to a new one as soon as the momentum ran out. It was simple enough to describe, but it was utterly lacking in any finesse and required the utmost concentration to avoid disaster.

Emilia was demanding an acrobatics act, a preternatural control of the whip that Subaru had been handling for only about a year. And to top it all off, she didn't have even the slightest doubt that he could pull it off.

The girl he loved had absolute faith in him. There was no way he could mess up now.

"God, Buddha, master—whoever's listening, guide my hand!

"And I'll do this!"

Subaru prayed to every greater power he could think of, including his master, Clind, who had taught him the way of the whip. He was facing an unimaginable challenge where a single mistake would mean death. Emilia didn't have any doubt that he would pull through and entrusted him with her safety while she unleashed another enormous pillar of ice at Regulus, who was closing in from behind.

Her latest projectile was so massive, it almost looked like the sky was falling.

It filled the entire great canal, leaving Regulus nowhere to run. However, he just slammed straight into the mass of ice and came out the other side.

It didn't break or split. He passed through it, leaving an opening in the outline of his body where he touched it—just like what had happened to the ice walls behind Reinhard after Regulus kicked him.

In other words, the power he was relying on now was the same as whatever he had used on Reinhard. Subaru thought it might be a clue to figuring out how Regulus's ability worked, but—

"He's going to catch up!"

"Ha-ha! Did you think you could get away? Not only are you putting up a futile resistance, but your excessive self-consciousness and underestimation of me are infringing on my rights. But I've caught up, so you can pay the price for that thoughtlessness now!"

Regulus shouted as he kicked the water's surface, unleashing a tsunami-like torrent toward Emilia and Subaru. As payback for that enormous hunk of ice, this time he unleashed an attack that they couldn't escape.

Emilia gasped as she looked up at the wave surging over their heads. Subaru lifted her.

"Yeah, well, *we're* finally ready, too!"

"What?!"

Regulus's eyes widened as Subaru shot back a bold retort, and the tsunami came even closer. Suddenly, another figure appeared—the one who cracked the road, crashed through a building, and charged into the waterway was none other than Reinhard. The same Reinhard who had endured Regulus's kick and been hurled into the distance earlier.

He dashed straight into the middle of the canal toward the oncoming wave.

"Apologies for keeping you waiting."

With that brief apology, he swung the Dragon Sword in its sheath. It was paradoxical that a blunt weapon could slash, but the force of the Sword Saint's swing could make anything seem sharp.

The horizontal slash cut the tsunami in half, and the water maintained its shape as it fell forward. A giant plume of water rose as the threat of the tsunami dropped away.

"How absurd must you insist on being?!"

Breaking through the giant splash of water, Regulus leaped out with his teeth bared, drawing close to Reinhard. Reinhard dodged

Regulus's arm and ran across the water as he smiled wryly.

"People ask me that fairly often. But you are also quite removed from the average person yourself."

"Don't lump me in with you, monster. And what is this? Do you have all the time in the world? You should go out and live your own life! How much will you obsess over disrupting the relationships of others before you are satisfied?!"

"The flow of emotion between you and Lady Emilia is rather too one-sided to call a relationship. Besides…"

Spinning the Dragon Sword, Reinhard deflected Regulus's attack and showed his back. His blue eyes caught Subaru and Emilia rejoicing at the Sword Saint's return.

Reinhard smiled as he saw the two of them holding each other.

"I'd much prefer to support my friend's relationship. If possible, I want to be invited to the wedding."

"Thank you for sharing that pathetic dream with me. Maybe you can achieve it in the next world!"

Cracking a bit of bold humor in the life-and-death struggle, Reinhard smiled as Regulus shouted while he lashed out with another killing blow. Meeting him head-on, Reinhard leaped off the water between where Subaru and Emilia were skiing and Regulus, maintaining their relative positions by parrying the incoming attacks with his sheathed blade.

And seeing how Reinhard had a firm foothold on the water's surface, Regulus's lips twisted.

Reinhard leaned heavily on the leg that should have been explosively amputated by Regulus's earlier attack. At the very least, it should have been so painful, he couldn't stand.

"You're a detestable sort, aren't you?! So your forte is not just swords but even healing magic? How many people have you trampled underfoot just by being more blessed than the average person? How nice it must feel to crush the dreams of others without any effort at all!"

"Allow me to correct one misunderstanding of yours—I don't have any aptitude for healing magic. My leg was healed in a hurry by the lesser spirits in the atmosphere who were worried for me. That's all."

The white hem of his clothing was still bloody as Reinhard launched himself off the water's surface with his healthy leg, thrusting the tip of the sheath into Regulus's solar plexus. It didn't cause any damage, as usual.

However, just like with Emilia's ice staff, Regulus's pride was badly wounded.

"Begone with you."

It was a brief, quiet statement, belying the real rage and murderous intent hidden behind it.

One step behind in his chase, Regulus reached his hand beneath the surface and flipped the water as if he was tipping over a table. Another enormous wave crested once more before crashing toward Subaru and Emilia.

"Plan O!"

"O? What is…? Wah!"

Subaru lifted Emilia up as he signaled Reinhard.

Holding the girl who was as light as a feather, Subaru used the lesser spirit to create an ice ramp that he ran straight into, sending both of them flying into the air.

Clearing the lip of the great canal far overhead, the two of them escaped the reach of the massive wave. Squeezing Emilia tightly in his arms, Subaru looked back.

All that remained on the water was Reinhard facing off against the onrush of water—

"Hah."

Exhaling sharply, Reinhard's outline blurred. He then proceeded to kick off the water and then the air, dodging around the wave and appearing right in front of Regulus.

"You…!"

Just as Regulus exploded in shocked outrage at the Sword Saint's speed, the Dragon Sword slammed home and found his torso. The attack landed below his armpit, sending Regulus's body flying high above the canal. Reinhard immediately followed him by also taking to the air.

His next attack batted Regulus down into the tsunami that he himself had created.

"—! Fool!"

Regulus cursed as he fell like a rock. There was an explosion of water as the wave met his back at violent speeds. The enormous tsunami split in two, and the roads on either side of the canal were doused by an alarming shower of water.

A whirlpool quickly formed at the spot where the wave split in half, and Regulus stood with his arms calmly crossed at the very center. With a single step, he created a pillar of water that he rode upward, flying at Reinhard.

"You thought that might work because it was my own attack? It's one thing to overestimate yourself, but don't get carried away with that bad habit of looking down on your opponent without reason. There is no way something so foolish would work on me!"

"So that doesn't work, either—"

Regulus's body held sway over even the violent torrent of water that ground down everything caught in its path.

Seeing the wave undone by the invincibility it had crashed into and scattered all around, Reinhard nodded briefly to Subaru, whose path he had watched from the side of the canal.

Messing up the landing, Subaru had skidded on his butt as he hugged Emilia close to protect her. Acknowledging Reinhard's nod, he rubbed his bottom as he stood up.

"The O (Own goal) plan didn't work, either, huh?! Argh, my butt really hurts!"

"Plans A and S didn't have any effect, either. Sorry, my strength is insufficient."

After their gazes met for a brief second, Reinhard's telepathic blessing reentered Subaru's head. With the confirmed failures of plans A (Armpit) and S (Solar plexus), he moved on to the next.

Subaru had listed off almost every pattern he could think of for breaking through apparent invincibility. The sources were all secondhand from various games and manga, but that basic approach should have been correct.

Just like with Petelgeuse, Regulus had to have some kind of weak point.

"Drowning, a Siegfried-like weak spot, and self-destructing from his own attack all got ruled out! What's left?"

"We're going to fall behind Subaru!"

"I know, but…"

Emilia pulled at his hand impatiently as Subaru desperately tried to wrap his head around the situation.

Reinhard was keeping Regulus busy, so this was the best chance to analyze the Archbishop's ability.

The battle with Regulus was a test of whether they could break through his invincibility. If they could just get past that, Regulus was little better than an average thug.

"Are we going at it from the wrong direction? Did we get the wrong idea at some point? If there's something I've fixated on, it's…"

There had been all sorts of odd phenomena throughout the fight. The way Reinhard had passed through solid ice like a cartoon character after being kicked and the way Regulus had done the same. The way bits of dirt and water droplets were transformed into weapons of mass destruction. And the occasionally unnatural physical abilities Regulus exhibited. Those should all be a function of his ability.

"What should I do, Subaru? Is there any way I can help?"

Emilia pleaded impatiently as Subaru sank into thought.

In the distance, Reinhard and Regulus's intense battle in the canal was continuing. The sheer impact of the fighting was transmitted clearly through the trembling atmosphere as new tsunamis and pillars of water continued to appear one after the other.

Emilia felt helpless, and Subaru was in the same boat. He felt ashamed that he couldn't live up to the trust that had been placed in him.

Emilia and Reinhard had put their faith in him and were aiding his plans.

And it was not just them, either. He was carrying the hopes of all his other comrades who had headed to the other control towers. The same went for those waiting back at the base for good news and all the people of the city who had responded to his broadcast.

"Emilia-tan, I need some kind of hint. Tell me whatever comes to mind. When you were being held by him, did you hear or notice anything strange? Literally anything."

"Something I heard while I was being held…"

Think. Think. Think, think, think, think, think.

As he desperately tried to consider the problem from every angle, he reached out to Emilia for help in breaking out of the mental dead end he found himself in. They were almost certainly unpleasant memories, but Emilia had spent more time interacting with Regulus than any of them.

And there was no saying he might not have accidentally let slip some small clue that would let them figure out the true nature of his power.

Emilia furrowed her brow as she thought about the question.

"Ummm, the first thing that comes to mind is 'virgin'? He asked about that…”

“I’m gonna murder that son of a bitch.”

Where the hell does he get off asking an angel something like that?

Subaru’s hatred for Regulus reached new depths he didn’t even realize existed. Ignoring his burst of outrage, Emilia continued to search her memories of the past few hours.

“He called his wives by numbers, got murderously upset just over being laughed at, and when I said he was like a tyrant, one of his wives said he was a little king…yeah, ‘little king.’”

“—A little…king.”

As Emilia slowly reached back, one of the phrases caught Subaru’s ear.

It could be interpreted as just sarcasm. Regulus’s attitude put even the most domineering of husbands to shame. He was absolutist in every possible way, exactly like a king without the depth of character to rule.

It made perfect sense why someone with that personality would be called a little king.

But Subaru recognized that phrase from something else, too.

It was—

“—the name of a star.”

Subaru suddenly realized it.

Regulus, Sirius, Capella, Alphard, and *Betelgeuse*—the names of the Archbishops of the Witch Cult all matched the names of stars that Subaru knew.

The thought had crossed his mind more than once before, but every time he had ignored it. That sort of coincidence should have been impossible because the stars Subaru knew had names that weren’t originally from this world. They were from his old world.

It simply didn’t make sense. A random occurrence like that couldn’t possibly mean anything.

However, Subaru had already learned over the past couple of days that he couldn’t just write it off.

“The Water Raiment Inn, Jabaneez architecture, Hoshin of the Wasteland…”

They were all things that had a whiff of his old world about them. It all pointed to the existence of someone other than Subaru who had been pulled into this world.

There were clear signs of influence from Subaru’s world still lingering in this one that he couldn’t just laugh off—so what if the names of the Archbishops were the same?

It was a little hard to imagine it was all a mere coincidence.

It wasn't just the name that matched, either. *Regulus* was Latin for "little king"—what were the chances of *two* coincidences?

And Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti lent it credence, too.

If his name really was derived from Betelgeuse, then its origin was also the Arabic phrase meaning "hand of Jawza"—hand of the central one. It was not hard to imagine that his unseen hands were related.

If the same logic was applied to Regulus, the star in the Leo constellation that would later be called Regulus had a different name during Roman times. A name that meant—

"—Emilia, I have a question."

Linking those points together, Subaru's voice fell. Emilia blinked, and then her expression grew serious.

"Whatever you need," Emilia said with a vigorous nod.

Looking into her violet eyes, Subaru touched his neck.

"He was holding you by the throat in the chapel. While that was happening, did you notice…was Regulus's hand warm? Or was it cold?"

Emilia's brow furrowed at that question.

Both because it required thinking back carefully but also because she couldn't understand what Subaru's question was getting at. However, as she reexamined what happened during the chapel, her expression became clear.

"Ummm. Thinking back on it…I didn't really feel anything. His hand wasn't hot or cold. It almost felt like nothing was touching me."

"Nothing?"

"It was *really* weird. Like being touched by a shadow or the air…"

Emilia was vexed, struggling to put it into precise words. But Subaru inhaled sharply at her response, as if his own suspicions had solidified.

Despite furiously fighting for so long, Regulus seemed entirely unperturbed, and he didn't so much as breathe heavily throughout the battle. Even after being plunged deep underwater, he emerged completely dry, and no matter where he was hit, he sustained no damage. And on top of that, he could turn bits of dirt and drops of water into lethal weapons, wielding an overwhelming power that turned the whole city into his personal playground.

Mere invincibility couldn't begin to explain all that.

"—Reinhard!"

Grabbing Emilia's hand, Subaru shouted over to the canal where the furious clashes were still ongoing.

The Sword Saint and villain were locked in a battle that allowed no one to intervene. But even while walking a tightrope between life and death, Reinhard briefly directed his attention toward Subaru.

Subaru shouted with all his might in order to reach him.

The villain Regulus Corneas—if the Authority of Greed he wielded was what Subaru suspected, then—

"Check if his heart's actually beating!"

CHAPTER 2

PAEAN TO A CITY IN FLAMES

1

Hey, there! Liliana here reporting live on the scene!

Yep, yep, we are currently here in the fourth district of the Water Gate City Pristella! Here where one of the control towers is being occupied by an Archbishop of the Witch Cult! At the moment, we're in the middle of the fight to reclaim it!

This is part of a grand plan to deal with those terrible cultists! Bands of resistance fighters in the city are all taking part!

We've got a murderers' row featuring all the stars, and the fights at all four control towers are starting at the same time!

You may be asking yourself what am I, Liliana Masquerade, an adorable singer, doing brazenly joining a lineup filled with all these big shots? Well, let me tell you, because it's quite the unexpected twist! I can't exactly back out now! So please allow me to introduce the crazy folks joining me here on this stage!

"—I am growing rather sick of that face of yours. It's about time that you get on your knees and offer your head to me. As a reward, I might just make a candlestand of that skull of yours."

This is what everyone has been waiting for! That brutal condescension combined with just a hint of some super-weird tastes! Those beautiful, almondlike, fiery-red eyes, that dancing figure like flame incarnate! That whimsical mood and personality that shifts like a flickering flame! That glorious crimson beauty too dangerous to touch!

Leaping around with a Sunlight Blade in one hand, she is my lifeline and the cornerstone of our attack and defense! The one, the only, the most egotistical of egotists! Lady Priscilla Bariel!!!

But also, if she actually made people cut off their heads, we would all die, too, Lady Priscilla, so maybe spare us that!

Lady Priscilla is dashing along the edge of a waterway completely engulfed in raging flames, swinging her gleaming crimson blade again and again without pause in an immaculate sword dance!

Bang, shing, boom! Her opponent takes another fierce blow and gets sent flying!

But! She holds on! And now she's glaring at Lady Priscilla!

"Aaaah, aaah, aaaaah! Why does everyone try to keep me from him?! It is sad, so sad! My heart may break from this tragedy! My heart quivers! Such violent emotions…aaah, the grief just doesn't eeend!"

There it iiiiis! Screaming while bawling her eyes out, it's the bandaged mystery woman you all know!

Her face and body are both hidden beneath layers and layers of white bandages! The Witch Cult's standard robe worn so boldly atop! Abandoning all femininity, those chains on both arms flail wildly to create an impenetrable realm of danger!

At this point, no one even knows what she's saying anymore! It's the Witch Cult Archbishop of Wrath Sirius Romanée-Conti! She was even kind enough to introduce herself at the start!

"—Haaaaa!"

Howling, the mysterious Sirius has tears running down her face as she swings her chains! Her tears seem to catch fire as explosions swell all around the plaza in front of the control tower! I have no idea how any of that makes any sense!

The waterway surrounding the plaza is shrouded in a white blaze! And all around the blazing waterways surrounding us are people, people, people! All the people in the shelters in the fourth district have come rushing out to watch this battle! Or not! They are all rolling around on the ground while sobbing and crying out! They almost seem like they're mirroring Sirius, who is also tearfully wailing!

In other words, this is the power of Wrath that plunged our Water Gate City into the depths of pandemonium!

There is no sanity left in their eyes as they cry and rend their clothes! They have been poisoned or intoxicated or enraptured by their emotions!

It's clear as the brightest, shiniest, sunniest day that nothing good will happen if we just leave them be, so maybe it's time I give a little performance!

"*Sniff, sniff*…a-all right, this is a once-in-a-lifetime big-time stage!"

Take the high ground! Look out across the flaming stage, the tearful audience, and the dancers sending sparks flying. Speak up now that I've stepped up to the stage, too!

Honestly, my heart is hammering, and I can't really say for sure that my emotions don't have a strange hold over me, poisoning me, intoxicating me. I'm the opposite of certain, but when it comes to music, that's just how it always is for me!

So bring it on! How can I call myself a minstrel if I can't even overcome a minor swelling of emotion?!

And finally! Allow me to introduce the last of our crazed stars and the headline act!

"Hear ye, everyone at the back! And those up close, watch my dance! And for those way in the back, I'll be raising my voice as high as I can, so make sure to listen close! Liliana Masquerade shall perform a song and a dance for you! Lend me your ears! This is 'Beyond Daybreak'!"

Strum your lyulyre! Project your voice so it can reach far and wide! Be careful it keeps a beautiful ring for those close by! We're borrowing a song and music from the world. And away we go!

This is Liliana Masquerade's biggest stage—!

But before we get to that! Let's look back for just a second at how we ended up here!

2

"Um, um, um, um, um, ummm, Lady Priscilla! Ummm, is this really okay?"

"What are you talking about?"

Liliana looked pale, but Priscilla was utterly calm and indifferent.

They were currently in the center of the city, specifically the conference room in city hall.

Just minutes ago, it had hosted the discussion on how to deal with the Archbishops, where the plan to split up their forces and simultaneously face off against all four Archbishops in their respective towers had been agreed upon.

The Archbishops were all wickedness personified, and it wasn't entirely clear which was the most difficult opponent, but if nothing else, the scale of harm wrought by Wrath was enormous. That was who Priscilla's team would be facing.

Wrath's ability manipulated other people's emotions, and it had already afflicted Pristella.

"Isn't it a little strange?! It's going to be a decisive battle with such a powerful enemy, and I'm the only one going with you?! I won't ask for the Sword Saint, but you could at least bring your knight Sir Al—"

"There is no knight in my retinue. Al is a mere jester, nothing more. And that jester has acted a little too freely as of late. A punishment is in order. Moreover, what could possibly be lacking when I am present?"

"I mean with such large breasts, you are unquestionably a goddess, Lady Priscilla. But even so!"

Priscilla puffed out her chest magnificently in a display of absolute self-confidence while Liliana cried out even as she beat her own significantly less well-endowed chest. Priscilla chuckled lightly at that display as the minstrel broke into uneasy tears.

"Why are you crying? What an odd girl."

"B-b-but I want to just curl up in a baaaaall. Who's the one who said the Witch Cult is like a leaderless band of outlaws? They sure seem coordinated for a bunch of random thugs."

Otherwise, how could they have taken control of all the city's key infrastructure at once and then proceed to lord it over the untold thousands in the city?

As Liliana trembled again with fear at the might of their enemy —

"—Oh, what's this? I've stumbled across quite the scene."

A soft, beautiful voice interrupted, drawing Liliana's attention. Her eyes met with those of the woman peeking in from the entrance to the room.

"…She-fox…"

"Dearie me, isn't it a little too rude to be callin' someone that to their face?"

The royal candidate Anastasia's sweet expression furrowed at Priscilla's comment.

Priscilla and Anastasia. Out of all the royal candidates, these two seemed to get along particularly poorly, and they had argued several times already during their short time together in city hall.

Anastasia glanced at Liliana, who was openly weeping in front of Priscilla.

“What’s this? Did the princess here say something terrible again?”

“I? To this Songstress? Rein in your thoughtless prattle. I am the one who best understands her worth. Why would I willingly debase that value?”

“Eh?! That was your idea of being nice to me, Lady Priscilla?!”

Liliana had a minor outburst, but when Priscilla glanced at her, she reflexively closed her mouth and pursed her lips. Watching the two of them, Anastasia shrugged helplessly.

“Looks like you’ve managed to win her over, but is this really okay? It’s an Archbishop you’re goin’ up against after all.”

“Tedious. Do you wish to retread what has already been settled? Get to the point and do not waste my time—I have no intention of idling about here.”

“…You really are difficult to work with.” Anastasia smiled awkwardly before a bitter look crossed her face and the corners of her eyes fell. She looked straight at Priscilla and said, “Thing is, after everyone’s gone, this place’s defenses will be…”

“We can trust that those underhanded louts will try the same tactic. If we divert resources toward the control towers, those boors will undoubtedly take aim at our undefended base. Use Al as you please.”

“—That sure was fast. You’re a dangerous one.”

Anastasia nodded at Priscilla’s answer, as if that had been what she came for all along.

Liliana struggled to keep up as she listened to their exchange. Priscilla had seemingly been all for leaving Al behind at their base from the start, so—

“Ah-ha! I see! You trusted Sir Al, so hieeeeeh?!”

Just when Liliana felt like she could grasp what was going on, she was seared to the bone by Priscilla’s crimson gaze. The fire in her eyes was a little too intense to be simply a desire to hide her embarrassment, and the force of it sent Liliana skittering frantically behind Anastasia to hide.

“You don’t have to look quite so scandalized, Princess.”

“The topic of such things as trust and faith is not one to be broached so imprudently. I shan't deny that I rely on his service quite often, but that and trust are entirely different matters. There are many things I cannot discuss with him. And in the first place"—Priscilla looked meaningfully over at Anastasia—"you have no place to speak when it comes to hiding things. Isn't that right, she-fox?"

"…I don't have a clue what you could be referrin' to."

"Feign ignorance if you wish. It's no concern of mine. Stew in malformed guilt toward your knight for all I care."

Priscilla snorted as Anastasia's lips curled bitterly. Liliana couldn't glean much from the exchange, but those two heavenly people apparently understood each other.

Either way…

"Is there anything else? I and the Songstress have work to do. You are free to just quaver and await our news."

"No need to be so nasty… Do you have a plan?"

"Why should I resort to petty tricks when demonstrating that which defines me? I shall take the Songstress with me and approach from the front. Ah, there is one place we must visit first."

"Where?"

Anastasia furrowed her brow at Priscilla's audacious fearlessness. Priscilla nodded deeply, smiling like the ultimate beauty.

"I will go to my lodging—I must change into an appropriate outfit."

3

"If I am to attend a performance by the Songstress, then I must have a fitting dress."

Priscilla said that as they arrived at her deserted lodge. She pulled out dozens of outfits from her closet, judging which would be the most apt attire for battle, and then began to change clothes.

"Uwaaah, eeeeh?! Wait, wait, bwe-heh-heh…"

Even if there was no one around, Priscilla didn't hesitate to strip naked as she changed clothes. Also in the room, Liliana stared hard, flying into a panic while simultaneously rejoicing.

"What a glorious day… But is it really all right to spend so much time on this?"

"Time spent performing necessary tasks is never wasted. I shan't forego crucial steps that must be carried out. The outfit chosen here could well be the factor that determines the fate of this city."

"Your dress can decide something like that?!"

It was an incredibly pretentious statement, but Liliana didn't feel comfortable just coming out and saying that was impossible given Priscilla's mood.

In fact, as someone whose music was influenced on a day-to-day basis by her own mood and various other factors, Liliana recognized that Priscilla was similar in how her strength was affected by the same sorts of poorly defined things.

Others like them existed all over. There were people whose impact on the world was determined by factors tangible and intangible.

"C-can we really win this?"

"But of course. This world is made for my convenience. However, the enemy this time has prepared quite the ensemble. It will require a commensurate amount of effort to bring it all down."

For a second, it almost sounded like Priscilla was going to criticize Liliana for her timidity, but what followed was a matter-of-fact response. Then she held up her orange hair and turned her back to Liliana.

"I'll allow you to touch me. Do up the back of the dress."

"Hee-hee."

For some reason, Liliana let out a creepy giggle as she immediately drew close to Priscilla. Following instructions, she fiddled with the fastener for the deep-red dress. And seeing Priscilla's completed figure, she couldn't help but sigh.

"S-so beautiful…"

"Naturally. This coordination is to match your singing voice. It is rare for me to compromise with another like this, so you have a duty to live up to my expectations."

"Uyahooi! Isn't that a pretty huge responsibility?!"

Liliana trembled and held up her hands as Priscilla finished changing. The bold crimson dress left her shoulders bare and had a daring slit that ran all the way up her long legs. It enhanced her striking visage while also allowing full freedom of movement with the presumption that the wearer would be going dancing. Her neck was adorned with large teardrop jewels, and overall, she was the manifestation of a burning beauty who would scorch whoever beheld her.

"So beautiful and with such large breasts…a goddess! A goddess has descended from the heavens…!"

"Something as absurd as deities are not to be relied upon. 'Tis better to call out my name instead."

"Lady Priscilla…!"

With that final exchange, the two of them departed the inn, and this time they headed toward their destination.

"The control tower…where the Archbishop of Wrath will likely be."

There was a stiffness to Liliana's voice. It was the unease and nervousness that naturally accompanied an unavoidable battle drawing near, but that wasn't all.

"Are you worried about the diva fanatic?"

"Ah, ummm…yes. I heard about Kiritaka, so…"

Liliana averted her eyes and poked her fingers together in a gesture of worry. At the most basic level, Liliana's relationship with Kiritaka was that of a singer and her fan. There were some misunderstandings and complications when they first met, but at present in Pristella, most would consider them to be on good terms.

Kiritaka was devoted to elevating Liliana as a diva. However, what he had fallen for was not her music but her.

"I enjoyed being pampered, and I spent a lot of time having fun, but Kiritaka was always forgiving…or I guess…"

She had never returned the affection that Kiritaka expressed in any sort of direct way. And realizing that now was unbearable for Liliana.

She could never meet him again, never talk to him again, and it was only then that she—

"I…"

"He is the final member of the Council of Ten. Considering their demands, it seems unlikely that man was killed."

"Wh-what?! Kiritaka is alive?! Really?!"

She had just been solemnly reflecting on the deceased, but Liliana leaped at that unexpected statement.

"It's only natural." Priscilla nodded. "The location of the Witch's bones they wish to obtain is known only to members of the council. What would happen if every last one of them were eliminated?"

"Then they wouldn't be able to get their hands on the bones?"

"Exactly. That would mean that the demand of whichever fool who desired those bones wouldn't be fulfilled. If their demands could no longer be met, they would have no reason to continue hiding behind the threat of opening the water gates. Do you understand what that means?"

Thinking harder about what Priscilla said, Liliana gasped, finally getting it.

The reason the Archbishops were occupying the control towers was to use the threat of flooding the city in order to negotiate. They all had their own agendas and were holding the city hostage as a bargaining chip.

But if one of the demands couldn't be met anymore, then there wasn't much reason to not make good on their threat.

"Whether as a petty revenge or for sport, the city would already be underwater by now. In order to prevent that, at least one member of the Council of Ten would need to be kept alive."

"But—but if the council got in their way, an Archbishop might just kill them all anyway, right?"

"That might be possible if they were prepared to let go of something that they desire. But that lot lacks the resolve to make such a decision."

With the rest of the council already dead, if Kiritaka also lost his life, there would be no way to discover the location of the Witch's bones. If that came to pass, it was all too likely that whichever Archbishop wanted those bones would open their floodgate in frustration, a possibility the other Archbishops would rather avoid because then their own demands wouldn't be met, either.

"In that case, isn't it strange that the members of the Council of Ten were targeted?"

"Not at all. It was surely not the cultists who killed the council members."

"What?"

"Once those fools of the Witch Cult revealed that they desired the Witch's bones, it became possible to foil their plans by simply eliminating those who knew their location. If anyone thought that far, that's exactly what they would do."

Liliana couldn't keep up with Priscilla's logic anymore.

What was she saying? Was there someone else in the city aside from the Archbishop who was committing evil deeds, going around silencing the members of the Council of Ten to—?

"It's rather likely at least one Archbishop will lose their temper if all the council members were killed. That is why the Archbishop of Wrath targeted the diva fanatic's company where that she-fox and the others were staying. To seize and safeguard that man."

"So then someone else was one step ahead of the cultists? That's…"

"The flood caused by the open water gate quite literally washed away the lost battle like water under a bridge."

Priscilla was referring to the brief opening of the gate in the first district a few hours earlier.

It had been for only a few seconds, but the massive amount of water that rushed in had caused a significant amount of damage to the city. But ignoring the property damage, the flooding had brought significant benefits, too.

The greatest boon was that it effectively ended the losing battle that Subaru Natsuki and the others had been fighting. Were it not for the sudden flooding, the group conducting the initial assault would almost certainly have suffered far more losses, making the second attempt to force a decisive battle all but impossible.

Being forced to leave things unfinished at that critical moment had likely been a painful blow to the Archbishops.

"Lady Priscilla, do you have an idea who was going around?"

Liliana suddenly voiced a question that popped into her head. Priscilla arched her eyebrows, pulled her fan from her cleavage, and hid her mouth behind it.

"Why do you ask? Is there some sort of reason to think I would know?"

"No, it's just that you were explaining it all so confidently, so I just thought maybe you knew something?"

"…I see. I spoke a tad too long with you. How unusual of me."

Looking away, Priscilla murmured to herself, sidestepping the question. Liliana obediently accepted the lack of response as an answer and didn't probe any further.

"If he is alive, then that's wonderful news," Liliana said in relief.

"Given the likelihood he was abducted, I cannot say with confidence that he remains whole, save for his lips, which he would need to reveal the location of the bones."

"Why would you say something that is just going to make me worried all over again?!"

Liliana shrieked. Did Priscilla want to ease her mind or not?

And their conversation concluded at almost exactly the same time as they reached their destination.

4

It was almost a letdown how quiet the plaza in front of the control tower was.

After marching in with the resolve to call out the Archbishop, Liliana was left feeling vaguely disappointed as she cocked her head in confusion.

"Wh-what? Wh-wh-what? What should we do, Lady Priscilla…? Does this mean that we won without fighting or singing?"

Liliana would have been satisfied with that resolution in its own way.

Their real goal was recapturing the control tower and not actually defeating the Archbishop. If they could skip straight to taking the building, then all the better.

"Heh-heh-heh. If this is some blunder, then the wise move is to take advantage. Let's hurry and go into the tower. If we can take control of the floodgate, then…gweeeh?!"

Just as she boldly stepped forward, Liliana's throat was ensnared from behind by a pale finger. She let out a sound like a chicken dying as Priscilla pulled her back.

"Nonsense," Priscilla muttered. "There is no reason for haste. You do not simply change songs partway through if the audience's reception is poor, do you?"

"O-of course not, but, ummm, what does that have to do with my neck…?"

"The enemy is no different."

Liliana's eyes widened as she struggled to understand what Priscilla meant. Just then, the stout stone construction of the control tower suddenly erupted in a blaze of flames emanating from its base. The plaza that had previously only had the moon for illumination was now dazzlingly lit.

Liliana's eyes blinked rapidly at the sudden shift from darkness to light, crying out as she dived into Priscilla's chest. Priscilla's expression was unchanged as she caught the Songstress. However, her crimson eyes were on the being that descended from the sky in front of the building that had become a towering inferno.

"Sorry for making you come all the way out here. And thank you."

The grotesque mystery figure wrapped in white greeted them in a gentle tone.

Her slender limbs were entirely covered in bandages. The only uncovered areas were her lips and eyes. This loathsome figure stood there calmly, her white bandages stained in spots with blood, though it was impossible to tell if it was hers or someone else's.

There was no mistaking her appearance even if they wanted to.

"That's the Archbishop we heard about… Maybe she's actually a normal person?"

The Archbishop of Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti.

Liliana mumbled in amazement at the unexpectedly cordial greeting as she buried herself in Priscilla's cleavage. There should have been no way for her to hear that murmur, but Sirius joined her hands in front of her chest.

"Dear me, sorry if I surprised you. It's just the city's services seem a little unreliable tonight. It's pitch-black everywhere, right? So I overstepped my bounds a smidge to make things a tad brighter."

Sirius spread her arms, gesturing proudly to the roaring fire consuming the control tower.

Her words didn't match the scene unfolding before them, but oddly enough, her intentions seemed to be in the right place. And they were even having a civil conversation, which persuaded Liliana to slightly revise her impression of Sirius.

"What's all this, then? And here I was stiff with worry about chatting with an Archbishop, but you're unexpectedly easy to talk to! Maybe I misunderstood you."

"Well, hearing that makes me very happy, young lady. I almost want to cry tears of gratitude at receiving such kindness. But people really can understand each other…if they just hold hands together! Right?"

"Yes! Absolutely! That is love after all!"

"Exactly so! Love! It's love! Answering love with love! That is true happiness!"

Liliana clenched her fists as Sirius expounded passionately on her theory of joy. Her opinion of Sirius continued improving as the Archbishop continued her exposition on the relationship between love and happiness.

And since she was dealing with such a sincere person, Liliana's own desire started to seep out. Still buried in Priscilla's cleavage, Liliana raised her hand and spoke up.

"Excuse me! Since you are so clearly a proponent of responding to love with love, there is something I would like to ask you! If you don't mind, would it be possible for me to inquire as to the well-being of one Kiritaka?!"

"Kiritaka…ah, the man who sat on the Council of Ten! The final member of the council who knows the location of the bones…yes, yes! If that is who you mean, then I have taken him into protective custody. After all, this city has become quite dangerous as of late. I never would have imagined someone would suddenly start killing all those who knew the location of those bones."

Sirius reached into her cloak and held out a book for them to see. The cover was pitch-black, and there was no identifying title, but everyone in this world would immediately recognize it as a Gospel.

"The Gospel that finds its way to members of the Witch Cult, the sacred text that reveals how the future should unfold…were it not for this, your precious person would have been in quite a lot of danger. What do you think? Is it not simply wonderful?"

"Th-that's true! There should be a Gospel for every household…no, one for every person!"

Liliana felt a slight bit of hesitation when she heard the phrase *precious person*, but if Kiritaka's survival really was linked to the account written there, then Liliana didn't have any choice but to bow before the power of that tome.

After all, Sirius was speaking so honestly, sincerely, and earnestly.

"I wouldn't lie. My husband is an honest man…so I want to live up to his standards."

"Th-that's practically saintly…!"

Hearing that, Liliana looked up at Priscilla from her bosom.

"Lady Priscilla! Why not try reasoning with her?! Looking at the big picture, maybe there isn't any need for slashes, clashes, and bashes or bloodshed…"

"…To think the effect would be so immediate and pronounced. Or perhaps you are just particularly susceptible?"

"Huuuh? Isn't this where your stubborn heart is supposed to soften as a beautiful smile begins to bloom? And then we all hold hands and dance…”

While Liliana was busy describing a happy, peaceful development, Priscilla gently placed a hand on her shoulder. And then, just as Liliana cocked her head in confusion, her gaze met those crimson eyes.

“Lady Priscillmnhgh!!”

Then Priscilla stole Liliana’s lips away.

“Mmm! Mmmm! Mmmgh!”

Liliana’s face turned bright red at the surprise attack, her arms and legs flailing desperately, but Priscilla pinned her shoulder and refused to budge. Before long, Liliana’s resistance gradually faded.

Feeling those soft lips and hot tongue running along her teeth, Liliana’s knees buckled. It felt like her whole body was melting away.

“…Ah…”

“Well, that should be sufficient.”

Liliana slumped to the ground, breathing heavily. Standing over her, Priscilla licked her lips and nodded to herself without any trace of malice.

“L-Lady Priscilla! What was that just now?! P-please take reshponshibility! Who’ll marry me now?!”

“It was I who permitted a kiss. You are free to use your inexperience as an excuse to make such demands, but consider instead that it was an opportunity to return to your senses and rather enjoyable for you as well, was it not?”

“Huh? Enjoyable and…”

Liliana’s cheeks flushed as she ran her finger over her lips in an oddly sensual gesture.

Seeing the two of them, Sirius put her hands to her cheeks.

"My, my, what passion between you young ladies…but that is also love. Love takes different forms for different people. And that diversity is the beauty that leads back to a singular love in the end—"

"—Enough with this farce. I tire of listening."

Priscilla's sharp interjection brought a cold silence to the plaza.

And then Liliana's cry suddenly rang out.

"Ah! What?! What—what?! What—what—what?! Where did that familiarity from before go?! The sudden crash of reality is killing my knees! Look! They're trembling!"

Flustered, Liliana pointed to her violently shuddering knees.

Glancing at Sirius, Priscilla crossed her arms, purposefully emphasizing her well-endowed chest.

"There are many in the world who drown themselves in self-satisfaction with shallow argumentations, but you are the most extreme of them all. Vile as a jester and seducing those around you—I can think of no reason to spare you your life."

When Priscilla opened with direct and open animosity, Sirius's expression changed for the first time.

The mysterious figure looked back and forth between Priscilla, who had kept her senses, and Liliana, who had returned to hers. Quickly realizing that the kiss she had witnessed was what freed Liliana from her ability, tears appeared in Wrath's eyes.

"How terrible! She had just begun walking the path of understanding with me, and yet, you forcibly pulled her back! To steal away love like that! It's too cruel!"

"Waaah! It's a little late to realize only now, but that was my first kiss ever!"

"Allow me to compliment you on one point and one point only. This welcoming fire agrees very much with my tastes."

"Wow! This doesn't even count as a conversation!"

The three of their egos were too strong, causing a pileup as they all insisted on dominating the dialogue. But Priscilla's hostility and Sirius's indignation were at least vaguely interacting on a similar level.

That was why Liliana cradled her head, at her wit's end and fully at the mercy of their increasingly antagonistic exchange.

"Ah! Right, was what you said about Kiritaka true? Or false? Tell me his fate!"

"I said before I wouldn't lie! Anything less than the truth would mean turning my back on my feelings for my husband! I only kept him safe to prevent another Archbishop from acting recklessly… However, I didn't give him special treatment—now, please look around you!"

"Eh? Around us? What is there besides the crackling tower of fire…? Wait, whaaat?!"

As Sirius spread her arms wide, Liliana glanced at the canals surrounding them and couldn't believe her eyes. Out of the long shadows beyond the light of the fire, countless flickering figures appeared—

"Th-they're…"

"The people of the city who have gathered. They were probably lying in wait beside the waterways from the start."

All the hair on Liliana's body stood on end as she realized what Priscilla was saying.

The plaza had been so quiet and empty when they arrived that she had almost been disappointed. With this new realization, the silence took on a far different meaning.

It had not been an empty silence but one that hid over a thousand people.

"Eh? Wait, does that mean Kiritaka is in this mess of people?! Argh, now you've gone and made yourself my enemy!"

"Behold! Every last person breathing as one, not a single disruption to the harmony… What is this but the result of people loving one another?! With such love, people can achieve so much! Is this not irrefutable proof?!"

"Proof? Of what? You call them witnesses to your spurious claims?"

Priscilla scoffed as Sirius gestured to all the people in the plaza and argued for the importance of loving one another. Then she touched Liliana's shoulder as the diva stood stock-still next to her.

"Return them to their senses. That is your role. And that is the reason for the kiss."

"P-please don't remind me of that! And please don't look at me so intently. When you look at me like that, my heart starts throbbing…"

"So it was too effective? Beauty such as mine can be a sin at times.”

As Priscilla boasted, Liliana glanced at her with a maiden-like gaze before focusing her attention on the people all around them.

A crowd had gathered for a twilight performance. All their eyes were wholly devoid of sanity. They were the same as the deranged people enthralled by destructive impulses that she had seen countless times in the various shelters they visited.

Liliana held a hand to her chest, wondering if Kiritaka really was somewhere in that crowd.

“I should mention that you had the same eyes as these masses just moments ago.”

“Whaaa—?! Really?! Scary! Oh! B-but in that case, if you just go around and kiss all of them, then wouldn’t evergggghhhhh?!”

Liliana cried out as Priscilla grabbed her by the face for saying something so thoughtless. Feeling like her brain might seep out from her ears, Liliana immediately regretted her comment.

“Don’t mistake our roles. You have yours to fill. And I have mine.”

“Ugggggh…ah, Lady Priscilla?”

Freed from that crushing grip, Liliana looked on in shock as Priscilla stepped forward.

Sirius’s sinister purple eyes glimmered as Priscilla’s crimson gaze pierced her.

“You’re quite headstrong, young lady. It seems there is a bit of a problem on your end. The two of you are close enough to exchange a kiss, but your words are very high-handed… Have you made any effort to properly understand her? Wished to become one? The way all of these people and I have been unified!”

Sirius shouted as she stomped her foot down, and the thousand people surrounding the plaza all moved in perfect unison.

The plaza quaked as if a giant beast had just set foot there, and the water brimming in the canals overflowed. The flames engulfing the control tower increased in strength, and love notwithstanding, the menace inherent in such a large number of people was painfully clear.

“I-if so many people attack all at once…”

“Now, learn how it feels! The joy of being smothered in love! Of becoming one!”

“Gyaaah! It happened right after I said it!”

The multitude roared as they rushed the bright stage. If they all pressed down on Liliana at once, her fair maiden's skin would offer little resistance, and her final moments would be upon her in no time at all.

"Ahhhhh! Father, Mother, Kiritakaaa!"

"Do *not* make me repeat myself—forget calling upon others. My name alone is sufficient."

Holding Liliana in her left arm as the diva clung to her desperately, Priscilla extended her right arm into the air.

From the sky, she drew a sword—the Sunlight Blade's crimson glow was impossibly vibrant, painting a red-hot streak in the night. That flash made it seem like the sun itself had returned to the sky.

"Bow before my Sunlight Blade. This is the primordial flame and the first flame that lit the seat of the emperor. Do *not* mistake this red gleam for whatever else."

"Eeeeeeh?!"

As soon as Priscilla finished her declaration, the waterways surrounding the plaza erupted with gouts of fire.

A tremendous blaze rose around the control tower, transcending from a scarlet hellfire to a divine white blaze. Almost as if it refused to flicker quietly, the white blaze boldly soared high into the sky.

Priscilla's Sunlight Blade had lit every canal surrounded the plaza on fire.

"This is…"

Even Sirius could not hide her agitation at seeing something so far removed from logic.

The control tower burned red even as the waterways burned white. The two conflagrations lit the night sky, but the effect of the white blaze was immense. The crowd that had transformed into a mob could no longer cross over the canals.

While moths might be drawn to flames, human instinct was less cooperative when it came to approaching raging fires.

"You are free to tell yourself that the most precious thing in this world is love, but it seems your supporters are not so willing to help prove your theory when their lives are at stake."

Adjusting her grip on the sword of sunlight, Priscilla turned its blade toward Sirius while flashing a sadistic smile.

Standing right next to her, Liliana was speechless when she saw that expression. Priscilla's wicked smile, overflowing with scorn and ridicule, was terribly beautiful.

Liliana had been taken aback by Priscilla's beauty before. She had sung its praises and burned it into her heart countless times already. But this was different—in that moment, she was truly stunning.

Clad in unparalleled beauty, Priscilla continued to ridicule the Archbishop.

"The very idea that all becoming one is a form of love is utterly ridiculous. Take me, for example. Unique and set apart from all as the most outstanding figure in this world. No matter the method, is there any way my eminence and a mediocrity can be joined together?"

"Huh? Um, isn't that a little harsh, Lady Priscilla? Perhaps a little bit of discretion might…"

"I reject everything about you, vulgar swine."

"Rejecting everything? Do you have to go *that* far?!"

After a tirade like that, even a normal person would want to snap, and this was the Archbishop of Wrath they were dealing with. Fearful of the consequences, Liliana flew into a panic as she tried to cover Priscilla's mouth, but she was swatted away like an insect and sent rolling across the ground.

"Pugyaaaa! That's too much, Lady Priscilla. If you're going to do that, then at least flash that Sunlight Blade before she has a chance to…gh!"

"Fool. Were I to do that, every soul aside from me would be split in two. The scene of a city stained in blood again would be a sight to behold, but it's hardly something I'm in a rush to see here and now."

"Ugggggghhh…"

"More importantly, do not make me say it a third time—fulfill your appointed role."

As instructed, Liliana hopped to her feet. She clutched her lyulyre and looked out at the swell of people beyond the white flames.

Her job was to free them from Sirius's power by her song—

"Now that I'm actually here, I'm really nervous about whether I can do this or not."

"If you don't, then it means they will all die. Just remember that their lives are riding on your music. It is an honor."

"Ukyaaa!"

Liliana covered her face and cried out like a screeching monkey as Priscilla, content that what must be done had already been decided, continued to stare down Wrath, who had remained silent throughout the entire exchange.

“You’re a type I’ve never seen before,” Wrath suddenly said. Instead of erupting, she hugged herself, and her cheeks softened almost as if she was enjoying herself. Her emphatic dark-purple eyes opened wide. “Yes, yes, yes! You are an alien element mixed into the world, filled with an unclouded faith in the power of love! Is coming to an understanding with you my latest trial?!”

Her lurid smile seemed to celebrate Priscilla’s self-centered principles. Her lips cracked into a grin, revealing frightfully white teeth as she entertained Priscilla’s opinion and gently accepted her viewpoint even as she rejected it like one might tolerate the mistaken belief of a friend or a family member.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself… I am the Witch Cult’s Archbishop of Wrath, Sirius Romanée-Conti.”

Elegantly holding the hem of her robe, she smiled and curtsied with great care.

It was an expression of the Archbishop of Wrath’s—of Sirius’s—twisted affection.

“I shall save you with love. Allow me to envelop you with universal, impartial, immutable love.”

As she gave that dignified statement, Sirius slowly extended her arms.

Metallic sickles appeared from her sleeves with a *clank*. Then the Archbishop spun her arms, extending the chains and slicing through the air as the twisted screech of metal on metal split the night sky.

This was a deadly weapon that could leave horrific wounds with a single blow, and as its roar filled the air, Sirius smiled.

“Let us begin the trial! The trial that I must overcome if I am to reunite with my husband in this town once more! So that we might share in love again! When I have triumphed over this trial, I will truly be worthy of him, and his love shall set me ablaze!”

Sirius spoke in a lively and cheerful voice, like a maiden in love. Just when it seemed her lean frame had edged slightly forward, she moved like an arrow leaving the bow.

“What a disagreeable enemy. I am not a patient woman. Be quick, Songstress.”

“Uhhh, Lady Priscilla?!”

After making one final comment, Priscilla advanced to meet Sirius.

The two of them closed in quickly, and on the stone-paved stage lit by red-and-white flames, a gleaming red blade and glimmering metallic chains both flashed as they took aim at each other.

As Liliana watched with eyes peeled, Priscilla began a life-and-death sword dance with Sirius.

Sirius's irregular chains didn't follow any standard sort of logic and traced an unpredictable path while Priscilla quite literally danced with her sword as she cut her way through the incoming attacks.

Liliana had seen Priscilla's amazing sword skills several times already during their circuit of the city. And seeing it on display once more made her realize all over again just how impressive it was as she didn't yield even a step against Sirius.

With Priscilla taking to the stage, it would be possible to defeat Sirius. However, in order to do that, she needed to free the people of the city from Wrath's power and prevent the Archbishop from bringing down anyone else with her.

And that fell to the diva Liliana Masquerade, who also stood on a stage.

"Grargh! Awww right! Let's do this! If I can't do this now, it'll be a stain on my honor! This is Liliana Masquerade's once-in-a-lifetime grand performance!"

Stirred up not by a sense of duty but by a much more intense impulse, Liliana started running as she held her lyulyre in her arms. And as she came to the edge of the water engulfed in white flames, she began playing her music for the people she could see on the other side of the blaze—to steal them away from their destructive urges.

"To start, please listen to Hoshin of the Wastelaaaaand—it's hot!"

Just as she was about to perform, she immediately stumbled. The white flames licked at her face, and Liliana recoiled frantically.

"Guooo! Hot—hot—hot! My hands are burning! If my mouth and lungs get burned, then we'll lose this… Wait, what?"

Just as she was imagining what would happen if she got swallowed up by the flames and her face was transformed into a scorched mess, she realized there were no signs of burns on her hands and lyulyre. Touching her face all over, she couldn't feel any injuries at all, just lingering patches of intense heat.

"This is… Lady Priscilla's white flame isn't like a normal fire…?"

In order to confirm it, Liliana stood at the edge of the water and carefully reached her hand out to the white flames. She intended to test it by letting the tips of her fingers just barely be licked by the white flame.

But suddenly the wind picked up and fanned the flames, engulfing her whole body in the white blaze.

"Guooo! Uh-oh! This fire is beyond lively! Almost too lively! Like seven times hotter than normal fire! If I got burned by this, it would be a seven-times-more-painful way to die!"

She groaned after experiencing pain far worse than she had imagined, but her actual body didn't suffer any burns. Just as she had suspected, Priscilla's white flames didn't sear and singe like a regular fire. However, the heat still remained.

What she could say was—

"—I can't get too close to the water, so I have no way of reaching them with my music!"

And then she promptly lay down after that despairing exclamation.

5

From the corner of her eye, Priscilla noticed Liliana writhing in pain after trying and failing to sing at the water's edge.

It was due to the white blaze created by her Sunlight Blade. That fire only burned those whom she chose to burn, so no matter how long Liliana bathed in the roaring flames, it would never ignite her body. However, the pain of the heat was a different matter.

Even if she tried to share her song with the masses, it wouldn't proceed smoothly.

"My, oh my, composed enough to be turning your attention elsewhere? If this really is a trial, then you should try being a little more serious as well. If you don't measure up, then I won't be able to face my husband."

Sirius denounced her the moment she diverted the slightest bit of attention toward Liliana.

If it was a simple demand for attention, it would be almost cute, but her appeal also involved vicious chains and sickles. She unleashed a brutal storm of attacks at Priscilla that would tear skin and break bone if even a single blow landed. Meanwhile, Priscilla deftly maneuvered her blade to parry, thrust, and swat aside every last one of Sirius's attacks.

"This vile weapon suits the wielder," Priscilla said with a distasteful sniff as she knocked away the chain again.

"That young lady looks like she's at a loss for what to do. It's easy to see the grief that is gripping her heart. Do you not feel that gripping pain is pitiable?"

"Not in the slightest."

Priscilla was coolheaded as her enemy unleashed more furious attacks that totally contradicted her calm and tranquil tone.

The chains and sickles tore through the wind with an earsplitting sound, coming from new angles every time. The metallic snake jaws that would never let go once they struck home came flying at high speed, aiming to gouge Priscilla's soft skin.

There was no end to the metallic scrape as the chains extended and retracted in turn. Viewed from above, the fierce assault made it look like Priscilla had been trapped within a golden cage as Sirius attempted to gain control of the entire battlefield. Priscilla brilliantly cut through the omnidirectional offensive with just her one Sunlight Blade.

"That awful din; your disagreeable, thoughtless inconstancy; this crude weapon lacking any aesthetic value; and your unbearably foul speech… You have some nerve to provide a welcome so utterly irritating. I'm almost impressed by such an astonishing level of disrespect."

"Y-you're amazing, Lady Priscilla!"

Suddenly, Priscilla's disinterested expression softened when she heard Liliana's unreserved compliments. Not knowing that Priscilla had smiled slightly, Liliana clenched her fist and thrust it high.

"Go, go, go! Put an end to this, Lady Priscilla!"

"See, that is an honest expression devoid of any artifice. Far more pleasant to listen to than any meaningless prattle… Though I admit the world is probably fine with just one person like this."

"Huh?! Was that a compliment, Lady Priscilla? That was a compliment, wasn't it?! I can take that as a compliment, right? I'm going to be happy about it, okay?! Okay! Yahoooo!"

As Liliana rejoiced behind her, Priscilla's momentum increased as her mood improved.

She advanced, cutting down the golden chains assaulting her one after the other in a storm of flame. When her Sunlight Blade and the metal chains clashed, instead of charming sparks, there were crimson flashes that scorched the very air. With each swing, those eruptions physically and psychologically rejected any outside interference.

However, Priscilla wasn't solely responsible for this otherworldly clash.

"Well, well, well, my, my, my."

Sirius cried out in admiration as she used her whole body to make her sickles and chains dance wildly. Her spinning chains exceeded the speed of sound, and the ability to control them so freely was a martial skill far beyond normal reasoning.

If Priscilla's sword dance was gorgeous and graceful, then Sirius's performance was fierce and furious. Unlike Priscilla, who only relied on her sword, Sirius's attacks were like a demonic technique that used every part of her body.

Her skill in controlling the chains existed in a realm that couldn't be reached without the sort of training that left her hands scarred and oozing blood.

"You are the first to be so obstinate even in the face of so many words and so much struggle. What could possibly have locked the door of your heart so firmly shut?"

"Do not indulge in meaningless probing. On a fundamental level, it is impossible for you to understand my motives."

However, there was no trace of mutual respect as their techniques crashed. Sirius's one-sided theory of happiness and Priscilla's own philosophy that utterly rejected it. Jumping backward a great distance, Sirius covered her face with the palm of her hand, as if grieving that seemingly insurmountable gap.

"If I do not, if I give up, then that is like admitting the world is nothing but darkness! No matter the heart, there remains the possibility of change! Feelings can grow as long as we yet live! Please understand. I wish to save you!"

"

bonding with and relying on others. What is necessary for that is empathy, conscience, and love!”

Sirius’s words flowed like poison into the silence Priscilla left unbroken.

Her words sweetly seeped into the hearts of anyone who listened with the familiarity of an old friend, and her gestures were overflowing with such charm that it invited you to abandon caution—all in all, it was a bittersweet temptation that was supposed to feel impossible to reject.

“The nerve. Your delusions are not something to shamelessly prattle about to others. Do not get carried away with your delusions. I have no interest in allowing the likes of you to examine me on even a surface level.”

Priscilla brushed aside that sweet and numbing enticement with nothing more than the sturdiness of her own ego.

But on that count, Sirius didn’t lose to her. As if expecting that rejection, the Archbishop cocked her head without even the slightest discouragement.

“Then what of this? ‘Iris and the Thorn King.’”

“

fast attack, and everyone else’s, Liliana’s included, should have rolled as well.

“Lady Priscilla?!”

But instead, Priscilla was sent flying back by a single chain that hit her dead-on.

CHAPTER 3

SIGN THE DIVORCE PAPERS

1

“Check if his heart’s actually beating!”

Subaru could’ve sworn his heart was pounding in his chest, threatening to tear itself apart.

It was a baseless idea, but as his instincts screamed out, he grew increasingly certain.

The Archbishops named after stars and what he knew about those star names from his original world had a particular overlap.

If it was all connected, then the hunch that he shouted would be significant.

“—Gh.”

A dreadfully oppressive feeling came over him, and it almost seemed like the world flipped on its head.

The air seemed like it grew dark and heavy.

If he had to describe this feeling, it was like a scab had been torn off, and something was incessantly licking at the fresh wound beneath it. The cause of all this distress was Regulus Corneas’s gaze.

“

Dragon Sword bellowed. The white sheath struck the back of his head with the sound of the level of violence normally too cruel to be directed at any individual. It sounded like a cannonball crashing into a fortress, and the impact forced the water in the canal away from Regulus.

The waters were already churning from the aftershocks of their intense clash atop the water's surface. So when Reinhard swung with all his strength, even if it only lasted for just one brief instant, the waters parted enough to reveal the bottom of the great canal.

The air itself seemed to creak and groan as massive torrents of water swirled, crashed, and frothed. If Subaru had been hit by that slash, he would've died a hundred times over.

But even after all that, there was not a single scratch on the villain's body.

"Do not misunderstand me, Sword Saint. I have been playing along with you out of magnanimity and because my composure allows it. Nothing more. But as kind as I am, there are still limits to my tolerance."

"—!"

As Regulus wore a monstrous smile while he rubbed his head where the sword had struck, Reinhard felt something was off and attempted to pull back so he could take stock of the situation—but then his legs stopped.

Reinhard's sixth sense perceived a clear and present danger from the empty air behind him.

"All the air around here has already been touched by me and is now my personal property."

Before Reinhard could take evasive maneuvers, Regulus's face was suddenly staring up at him from below at incredibly close quarters. Gritting his teeth at that bizarre manner of closing the distance, Reinhard swung the hilt of his sword upward.

His aim was true, and the pommel of the hilt crashed into the center of Regulus's chest. But the Archbishop just accepted the blow with a calm expression.

"Well, you tried your best," he sneered. "But a meaningless effort is the sort of tragedy that can only occur when one doesn't understand their place. This seems patently uncurable, so…at least provide me with some entertainment as you die."

"—It seems Subaru's hypothesis was correct."

"…What?"

Regulus's sneer warped, and his eyes widened as he looked down at his chest.

The pommel was still there, not doing any damage despite striking a vital point. However, it had succeeded in its other goal.

"—Gh!"

Realizing he had been had, Regulus grabbed Reinhard in a rage. The distinct sound of a crushed shoulder blade rang out as his fingers dug deep into Reinhard.

And just like that, Regulus flexed his arm as he asked, "I wonder if you have ever experienced falling into the sky?"

With one look at the white moon hanging in the sky, he threw Reinhard upward with all his strength.

Of course no matter how hard someone threw a ball, they could never throw it all the way beyond the sky. Then again, Regulus had already demonstrated his abilities made him an exception to many rules.

"

She was just trying to do whatever she needed to do as best she could.

Just like Reinhard had and just like Subaru was trying to do, too—

"When it comes to trusting you, I won't lose to Reinhard. So what do we do?"

"—Well, damn, that's a whole lot of trust and expectation. Really gets me motivated."

Squeezing her hand tightly, Subaru broke into a smile as he felt her warmth.

He was grateful to Emilia and Reinhard. He privately joked that he would have to remember to go pick up Reinhard's bones when this was all over.

"Well now, you two failures seem to be enjoying yourselves."

Turning to the two of them, Regulus adjusted the collar of his suit, sure of himself after just driving a powerful enemy from the field of battle. He started to walk toward them against the flow of the water that was gradually calming beneath his feet.

"You could always try a bit of despair, you know? Are you not about to face a punishment befitting the despicable and unjust savagery you perpetrated against me? You are, right? Infidelity and illicit intercourse. They are both sins worthy of death a thousand times over."

Regulus continued to spout his nonsensical logic. He seemed to have regained some composure after sending Reinhard flying.

This bastard is really looking down on us, eh?

"And to top it off, the insecure asshole has the gall to imply that the purest and most innocent heroine of our era is anything less than faithful."

"…What?" Regulus fell silent at Subaru's unexpectedly intense reaction.

"Don't act like you didn't hear me, you prematurely gray-haired jackass. Why don't you try using that empty head of yours for once?" Subaru emphatically tapped his own head before continuing. "You don't even know how selfish you've been this whole time, and I'm sure you don't want to know, but…have you noticed it yet? You're being cornered, even as we speak."

"Huh? Cornered? The idea's so incomprehensible, I can't even laugh at it. What could you possibly be trying to say? No, I don't particularly want to know. It would just be meaningless babble anyway.”

“Sorry to bother you while you’re busy acting tough, but you’ve got a right to hear it. You know, those precious rights you love so much.”

“I…have a right to hear…?”

Regulus halted, finally listening to what he had to say. Seeing that interest for the first time, Subaru had a good feeling about Regulus—if smooth talking worked on the Archbishop, then manipulating him would be a walk in the park.

With a derisive smile that made no effort to hide his opinion of Regulus, Subaru nodded.

“That’s right, since you would probably die from the embarrassment at losing without knowing why, right?”

“You…”

Regulus’s indignation boiled over as Subaru winked mockingly at him. He bent his knees to start approaching again, but—

“I won’t allow it!”

The countless icicles Emilia had created above Regulus’s head crashed down on him. They were not aimed at him directly and instead created a cage of ice all around him. This was to test holding him back with an ice prison.

But he swung his arm in mild annoyance, casually shattering the barrier.

“Here I was wondering what it could be you had planned, and it’s just witless repetitions like the struggles of an unthinking beast! When will you realize? Do you not remember? Learn already! What, are you opposed to the very concept? Do you suppose you don’t have to learn how to think, since you have a pretty face? Have some awareness, you defective fool!”

Regulus shouted arrogantly as the ice cage fell away. Just like Reinhard’s slashes, Emilia’s prison of ice did not pose so much as a minor inconvenience to Regulus.

But that was fine. It didn’t matter.

“Not that I didn’t already realize it from everything else, but his character is seriously dangerous.”

“Eh? Uh, well, I guess it is, but…”

“No.” Subaru shook his head at Emilia’s stunned reaction. “I don’t mean it just as an insult. It’s an important thing—he has a massively twisted personality and can’t be satisfied without patronizing and dominating other people. That’s why he keeps standing there and taking every attack we dish out.”

Regulus had a twisted idea of fairness. He bragged about being fully fulfilled and boasted about how he was so content. Those twisted thoughts and total lack of character and, more than anything, that bloated vanity were his weak points and openings they could exploit.

“There was no reason he had to go along with all of our gambits so far. Our ability to gain a bit of extra time with those meaningless actions is an advantage for us.”

“Can we beat Regulus with that little bit of extra time?”

“If we build up enough of it, absolutely. With your help, we’re going to win this. So can you trust me?”

“—Okay. Got it. I believe in you. No, I am continuing to believe in you.”

How could Subaru avoid getting revved up after hearing that from the girl he loved while she was wearing a wedding dress?

And so, all Subaru Natsuki had to do was live up to that faith with every fiber of his being.

“Lend me your ears, Emilia-tan.”

“Make sure you give them back, though.”

He leaned in close, whispering to her. She was stunned when she heard what he had to say. For just a moment, there was a clear note of anxiety in her violet eyes, but it was smothered by the exchange they just had.

Emilia seemed a little upset and openly wondered if he had started with that in order to lead into what he just said, but—

“We’re going to win. We’re gonna make him cry. And after that, let me carry you like a princess one more time.”

“Stupid.”

Just like that, her doubts disappeared, and she turned toward the canal.

“—Al Hyuma.”

Her mana interacted with the world, expressing itself in an unexpected form.

Yet again, the night sky of the city groaned as if in great pain, and an enormous pillar of ice formed up from the ground in an instant.

It crashed straight into the villain atop the water, but as expected, it didn’t fulfill its purpose, crumbling as a tremendous amount of ice dust created a fog around him.

"For such big talk about defeating me, there's not much art to your approach. Do you think I will conveniently run out of stamina if you keep attacking forever? I should warn you, expecting someone to just give in to your persistence is one of the lowest and worst forms of thinking and demonstrates an utter disregard for the… Huh?"

Waving his arm in annoyance at the white haze, Regulus was taken aback by an unexpected turn of events just as he was about to stare down the two of them standing on the side of the waterway.

Beyond the shimmering fog of ice crystals, what he saw was Subaru's back. Subaru had turned and started running.

"…Fleeing at this point? What? What?! Who do you think you are?!"

Regulus seethed as he kicked off the water's surface, chasing after the impudent boy with furious acceleration. It was the sort of speed that could outrun the wind and not something Subaru had any chance of escaping.

Just as Regulus's fingers were about to reach Subaru's back—

"Wh—?!"

"Parkour! The sort of skill that shines most in moments like this!"

His hunch had been correct. The angrier Regulus became, the more he fell back into the same old pattern.

Subaru crouched with perfect timing to evade the attack, as if he had eyes in the back of his head. And in the same motion, he ran up to the wall of a nearby building on the side of the road, grabbed a handhold, and quickly scrambled to the rooftop.

Left behind, Regulus's eyes burned in rage and shock at that agile maneuver.

"What was that?! Are you a monkey running for your life? It seems like you don't even realize this vulgar commoner's sort of vain struggle suits you perfectly!"

Looking up as Subaru easily cleared two and three floors before lifting himself onto the roof, Regulus roared in a rage. But all of a sudden, suspicion shaded his face.

"—Wait. What did you do with #79?"

Regulus finally realized that Emilia was no longer at Subaru's side. He was grateful for that obtuseness, but it wasn't time for him to notice that just yet.

"Answer me. Where is #79? You were trying to take her away just moments ago…”

“I was seriously speechless for a moment there to hear you actually calling a girl by a number and treating her like some sort of object, but the fact that you’re so absorbed in chasing after my ass that you didn’t even notice until just now has me even more speechless. What? You think I’ll answer just ’cause you’re curious? Why? You think I’m just that chill?”

“—Gh.”

As they looked at each other, Subaru pointed to his head while mocking Regulus.

Even if he didn’t understand the specifics, the ridicule dripping from Subaru’s words clearly got through anyway.

“Don’t get cocky, monkey. Partake in the just deserts of making a fool of others!”

Regulus didn’t chase after Subaru. Instead, he put the palm of his hand against the building Subaru had scrambled up. A moment later, there was a heavy crumbling sound like a millstone grinding grain. Then Regulus pushed a whole yard-high segment of the building like it was a woodblock tower.

“—!”

Naturally, with such an extreme renovation, there was no way for the building’s structural integrity to stay intact. As the upper floors dropped down a whole yard, a shock ran through the whole building, and the entire structure started to collapse.

“You dumbass!”

Subaru had anticipated a violent reaction, but he shouted as it came from an entirely unexpected angle.

As the building folded in on itself, Subaru leaped to the neighboring one, making up the height difference with help from his whip. After securing an anchor on the railing atop the new roof, he swung away from the building that sank like a foundering ship beneath his feet.

However, Subaru didn’t have time to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Run. Run like the little rat you are. If you’re too slow, you’ll die. Just pop! Splattered like a tomato!”

Regulus looked like he was in a good mood as he repeated his impromptu demolition on all the nearby buildings. Blowing away the bottom floors, he sent them toppling into one another with the lightheartedness of a child knocking over play blocks, cutting off Subaru’s escape routes as he devastated the once beautiful cityscape.

"You bastarrrrrd!"

As a storm of destruction raged around him, Subaru ran along the tilting ceiling and leaped over the railing, screaming as he flew through the air to the next building that was also already falling, crashing through a window and finding himself inside a stairwell, desperately searching for a way out.

From there, the route kept changing to whatever path was open, and a single moment's misjudgment or the slightest lack of resolve would bring his daring escape to an end.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! How unsightly! You do have a talent for fleeing desperately! Cry out a bit more and I might even feel a little bit of sympathy for you, wife stealer!"

"—!"

Subaru could hear Regulus's scornful laugh in the distance through the sound of the buildings collapsing, but he couldn't make out the actual contents of his words. Even if he had, it would just be meaningless noise anyway. Not even bothering to divert any attention to it, Subaru demonstrated the extreme limits of his concentration.

"There is always a way out of any situation in any given moment. Guaranteed. So do not neglect the work needed to find it. The moment you give up is the moment you die. That is fate."

The words of his alternate universe parkour master rang out in his mind.

No matter the situation, it was possible to find a way out. That maxim his master had beaten into him was a million times more valuable than any of Regulus's worthless babble. Then again, the Archbishop's rants had absolutely no redeeming value, so no matter what it was multiplied by, it would still be worthless. Regulus's prattle and his master's maxim couldn't even be compared.

Either way, though—

"—Survive."

The real meaning of that maxim was not just about some sort of ultimate essence of parkour in dangerous situations. It was a discipline and an attitude that could be used to face any situation. That discipline was what supported Subaru's frail heart in these dire straits, allowing him to just barely keep going.

His arms and legs were heavy; everything was going out of control and terrible. Pessimism threatened to dominate his thoughts. But pushing all that aside, Subaru put his all into searching for the light that would allow him to escape that pinch.

His body was hot, but his head was cold, his heart was clear, and he probed his mind.

What he needed was a way to steady himself so he wasn't standing at death's door. It would be enough to simply break out of the current situation, or it could even be something to change the environment. In other words, what he had to do was…

"—Regulus! I know the true nature of your power!"

After taking a deep breath, Subaru shouted as loud as he could.

He shouted even as he continued his acrobatic escape through the collapsing buildings. It was possible that his shout had not reached Regulus's ears through the thunderous cacophony of buildings crumbling left and right. Even if he had heard, it was a gamble whether it would actually strike a chord or not.

But if Subaru's analysis of his personality was right, it was not a bad bet to make.

"Oh, really now? That's interesting. So you're saying you think someone like you could possibly understand me?"

With that utterly serious response, Regulus stopped his demolition.

"

If his mind or body had been even a tiny bit slower, he would have been splattered inside one of the buildings.

But he had won his bet. His analysis had been correct.

“

strong are supposed to say? Though for someone as free from desire as me, it does rub me the wrong way. For the truly perfect, putting it so bluntly cannot help but smack of tastelessness.”

Taking a sharp breath at the attack that had just barely grazed his nose, Subaru froze as Regulus looked down at him, seemingly enjoying himself. Putting a hand on his hip, he stood there relaxed and utterly self-satisfied.

Basking in the disgraceful appearance of the person who had provoked him, Regulus snorted.

“So what? You know the true form of my power, do you? I find it hard to believe from a person who has proven time and again that he is all talk. Even if it is just your misdirected beliefs, it would be sad for you to die without knowing, right? And I am a merciful man.”

“Merciful, huh?”

And sure enough, Regulus spewed more of the same sort of nonsense and didn’t deliver the final blow. Indeed, with his absolutely superior position, he was even willing to entertain Subaru’s guess.

For a moment, Subaru considered how to respond to that.

One option would be to keep bullshitting to stall for more time. But for two reasons, that was not really an ideal response. The first was that if he did say something totally off base, Regulus might find that satisfying and kill him on the spot. And the other reason, the more important reason, was that Subaru still couldn’t be sure his hypothesis was correct and wanted to use Regulus’s reaction to gauge.

“What? Not going to say anything? Or is it that you can’t? If that talk before was just a lie in order to scurry out of your trap, then I can just pick up where I left off with your execution…”

“No, I’ll answer you, Regulus. The true nature of your power.”

“

Not out of shock at having his ability figured out but because he had no idea what that string of words was supposed to mean.

As that reaction subsided, Regulus's face quickly turned bright red at being played for a fool, and his mouth opened. But before he could erupt, Subaru opened his hand that was pointing at him, turning his palm to Regulus and stopping him.

"Or how about calling it Lion Heart, the ability to stop time for your physical body?"

"

meant “little king” in Latin. And in addition to that, the actual star called Regulus had a different name in Roman times—*Cor Leonis*.

“—Lion Heart.”

As soon as he remembered that, a certain explanation of Greed’s power leaped to the forefront as the most likely possibility.

What he needed in order to feel confident was confirmation of Regulus’s lack of a pulse, which is what he had asked Reinhard to do. As a result, Reinhard had been sent flying into the sky and still had not come back yet, but in exchange, Subaru’s suspicion had received enough confirmation that he felt confident of his hypothesis.

Subaru’s battle had begun long before he stood across from Regulus again. From the moment he realized that Regulus’s power could be classified as some sort of invincibility, he had gone through all the possible patterns he could imagine and developed methods for how to deal with each of them.

The suffocation plan, the Siegfried tests, the idea to hit him with his own attack—none of those had been jokes. He had been serious about all of it. Trying to find a way out would have been hopeless if he was not serious.

“We ruled out a superpowerful force field based on the fact that even Reinhard’s attacks couldn’t break through. And a full invincibility with a limited number of uses was ruled out, too, given your reaction after having sustaining so many attacks.”

If it was just plain and simple defensive power, then Reinhard should have been able to break through it with his attacks. If Regulus was simply invincible for X number of hits, then he should have been acting more concerned after coming under attack so often. He didn’t have the acting skills to keep calm, so the fact that he hadn’t tried to force a decisive encounter sooner meant that theory could be safely discarded.

And after ruling out all sorts of possibilities, between the star name meaning “lion’s heart,” Emilia’s recollection that she didn’t feel any body heat coming from Regulus, and the final piece that Reinhard had given him to tie it all together, Subaru had figured it out.

There was only one possibility left of all the patterns he had imagined that could explain—his power didn’t make him invincible at all. It was a time stop ability.

More precisely, Regulus could stop time for all sorts of objects.

Fulfilled. Not lacking. Complete.

The twisted worldview that Regulus espoused in all things spoke to the hideous way he lived, but it was also a confession of his power.

"If time has stopped for an object, then that means it doesn't change. No change means no getting injured, and it also means no getting wet, either. The dirt you throw and the water droplets all had their time stopped, too, so they couldn't be held back by the things they hit and just passed right through."

It was like the classic manga vacuum slash ability. There were all sorts of abilities in stories where people could cut through space itself, so that no matter how hard the thing they were trying to cut, they could still slice right through it. And Regulus's ability allowed something similar.

With his time stopped, Regulus Corneas himself was a distortion in space.

The bits of dirt that had been suspended in time had the destructive power to break through any and all defenses. It was possible to walk freely across the top of water whose time had been frozen. And he could nullify all attacks against him by simply stopping his own time.

It was the ultimate attack and the ultimate defense depending on how it was used. The invincibility was just a side effect of time stopping.

"Anyway, that's what I was thinking. So how'd I do?"

Still holding out his hand, Subaru finished his careful and lengthy presentation of his analysis. Hearing that, Regulus was speechless for once. His face twisted in shock as his cheeks tensed, and he shook his head.

He exhaled slowly.

"Do you think I have some obligation to answer that? I have no interest at all in whatever you might think. And it was indeed a tedious story. It really was a waste to even listen."

"…I'm honestly in awe at how utterly unbothered you are by that crazy whiplash. Do you not even remember what you said before I started talking? What are you, a goldfish?"

Subaru was stunned at how brazenly Regulus brushed back his hair and pulled a complete one-eighty. Jumping down his throat in an over-the-top reaction, Regulus's expression warped in rage as he stepped forward.

"Talking so high-and-might…! Not revealing one's own secret is obviously problematic even before touching on any questions of rights. Don't try to force your ego on me, you irritating twit! I should just scatter you in a million pieces, too—"

"If you do, then you'll never know where Emilia is, though."

"—!"

Regulus stopped when he was caught in a vulnerable spot. In that regard at least, he was splendidly honest, which made it worthwhile for Subaru to keep manipulating him.

"You know, at times like this, the villain would usually threaten to torture me until I talk."

"Who are you implying is a villain…?"

"Ah, I see. So you're that nauseating sort of evil."

The worst kind of evil was a banal, unthinking evil. His comment had been meant as sarcastic advice, but he was just left disgusted by Regulus's reaction. Thanks to the time spent explaining his theory, though, he had managed to catch his breath and recover a fair bit.

Deciding it was about time, Subaru looked up over where Regulus was standing and then to the faint, glimmering light—

"Now!"

That instant, the lesser spirit he had borrowed from Emilia dropped a hunk of ice straight at Regulus's head. Looking up immediately, seeing the ice right in front of his face, Regulus laughed.

"You're so persistent in clinging to a broken method! When will you learn?! It does not work!"

He didn't bother dodging at all and simply raised his arm, allowing the ice to crash over his body.

Obviously, the ice had no chance of breaking through his defenses. The ice just crumbled and turned back into mana. Once that was over, Regulus turned back, his face beaming as if he had accomplished some great feat.

"I won't deny it's a bit one-note. But I have to ask, when are *you* gonna learn?"

Having escaped outside of Regulus's range, Subaru stuck out his tongue mockingly. Seeing him running away, Regulus's eyes widened.

The aim of the ice had just been to draw Regulus's attention.

The moment he realized Regulus's invincibility lay in stopping time, it was obvious that a slap from a professional sumo wrestler wouldn't be any more effective than one from a baby.

"Ah, I guess you haven't actually acknowledged it for the record, but it's totally obvious you're stopping time."

"Youuuuuu!"

Even Regulus's repertoire of angry shouts was lacking in variety as he launched himself toward Subaru. The next instant he accelerated explosively, closing the distance in one fell swoop.

At that rate, the fingers of death would reach Subaru—but just before they did, Regulus's footing disappeared.

"Hah?!"

"It's honestly kind of surprising, but you're so obsessed with direct confrontation that you are almost comically weak against every sort of trick."

As Subaru said that, Regulus fell into a simple hole in the ground behind him. It was not a pitfall trap, just a plain hole, which was important. If there was any sort of lid or a covering of dirt over it, then it was likely he wouldn't fall into it for the same reason he could walk across water.

If there was a foothold, then he could just stop the foothold's time and step firmly on it. But if it was just open air, then he was out of luck.

Regulus fell into the hole, leaving a cartoonlike person–size imprint as his body crashed into the ground. Partway through, the time stop started affecting the ground, too, but it was enough to demonstrate the effectiveness of a pitfall.

"I've still got more for you, since this spirit and Emilia-tan have a good relationship."

"—!"

"My Beako is cuter, though."

Flipping Regulus off, Subaru continued to provoke him to keep his attention off the ground.

While he had been running around, he had tasked the lesser spirit with using its powers to dig out holes here and there around the area. There were marks for Subaru, but there was no way the totally unfocused Regulus would notice them. Unsurprisingly, perhaps because of the effect of having fallen into a hole once already, Regulus didn't step out quite as boldly for fear of falling into another hole.

He was totally ensnared. And Subaru would keep digging as many holes as he needed for as long as it would slow down his pursuer.

Of course a first-rate and even a second-rate warrior would never fall for a trap like that. Ironically, the fact that Regulus fell for them was proof that he had no experience with anything other than straight-up fights.

Facing enemies head-on, fair and square, and then crushing them with his overpowered ability.

The fact that he never did anything other than that was proof that Regulus didn't know any other way to fight.

"Sorry, but unfortunately I've only had a straight-up one-on-one once since I came here, and all I got from it was the memory of getting my ass kicked."

"Fighting with parlor tricks? Do you not have any pride as a man?!"

"I know exactly how worthless my pride is. Your power aside, on an individual level, I can outwit you any day of the week and twice on Sunday. I am worried that constantly doing this is making me a worse person, though."

This was why Subaru had persuaded Emilia to leave the battlefield there to him. With her intrinsic honesty, she would struggle with such a nasty sort of fight.

The angelic and honest Emilia had another role to fill. It was all about assigning the right job to the right person.

Of course, in addition to the number of tricks he had up his sleeve, there was also the pressing issue of stamina. It would be dangerous if he was cornered like he had been before, so he couldn't carelessly seek shelter in a building.

"But, man, I gotta say this leg really doesn't hurt."

He closed an eye as he looked down at his right leg that had been holding up surprisingly well as he kept making his escape.

During the chaotic fighting and all the parkour, it had been in peak form. His response to Emilia's concern earlier had not been just him acting tough. He could almost convince himself to forget that this particular limb had been practically torn off not just once but twice before being afflicted by some mysterious black tumor.

If it really was connected to the dragon's blood, then it was almost like that blood was telling him something:

—Show this villain. Teach this scoundrel who thinks himself a king

the dignity of the Dragonfriend Kingdom.

"I don't know about any country-level stuff, but I'll take the blessing."

"Each! And every! Little! Thing!"

The next instant the ground that was littered with holes exploded. Stone fragments and clods of dirt rained down all around.

Looking back, Subaru saw Regulus breathing heavily. In a frustrated tantrum, he had blown away the entirety of the ground along with all the holes that had been getting in his way. Of course that was the best response he could muster in the situation.

But—

"Finally realized it? For someone who loves blowing up everything that annoys him, why didn't you just do that to begin with? Did you stop time for your head instead of your body?"

"—Grrrhhh!"

With a simple sarcastic barb, he could transform Regulus's victory into a loss. Naturally, he had already moved far enough to escape Regulus's attack before provoking him further.

It was classic kiting—a textbook tactic for fighting a powerful enemy in a game. Thinking of it that way, Subaru realized fighting with Regulus was the most he had ever used knowledge from his old world.

"Meaning this is the first time I've been able to use cheats from modern-day Japan since the mayonnaise incident… No, I take that back. There was another opportunity that came my way. That was a tough fight, too."

"Who are you talking about…?"

"The one who lost to me and was used to make this whip."

When Subaru cocked his hip and showed off the item in question, Regulus's anger finally passed its boiling point and completely erupted. Regulus's face twisted malevolently, and his murderous rage spread through the buildings around him, changing the shape of the neighborhood.

That reaction was just what Subaru had been hoping for, but it had been a difficult balancing act to try and keep nearby shelters out of reach from Regulus's destructive venting. He wanted to stay as far away from them as he could, but unfortunately, the fact that they were conveniently scattered all around the city had come back to bite him.

"Haaah."

Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Subaru focused even harder.

He had to ensure his own safety while keeping Regulus from turning his attention to Emilia. The plan also involved pinning him down in one area and making sure that the people of the city didn't get caught up in the villain's rampage. Subaru had a lot of things he needed to do.

"Oh? What, cheering me on some?"

Suddenly, Subaru noticed a faint glimmer near his face. It was the lesser spirit whose name he didn't even know, the one Emilia had loaned him. It was fluttering next to him, as if providing encouragement.

It was a lesser spirit on the same wavelength as Emilia. Compassionate and probably similarly eager to offer its support.

"That's encouraging. Sort of feels like I'm being called a birdbrain by a certain someone."

Subaru chuckled as he wiped a bead of sweat from his neck, hiding a fierce determination behind an irreverent comment.

Subaru had to continue stalling for time while making sure that Regulus never realized that was what he was doing. And even if he did manage to recognize Subaru was stalling, he couldn't be allowed to figure out why.

In order for them to win, that was the role Subaru had to fulfill.

"

Just like Subaru's Return by Death was predicated on dying and Petelgeuse's invisible hands couldn't interact with things he couldn't see, Regulus's power absolutely had some kind of limit.

And what if that limit was the existence of all those wives who were constantly at his side, even on a battlefield? Whether it was Regulus's limit or just the effect of the little kingdom power—what if the number of wives or his distance from them or something about them was what he required for his Lion Heart ability?

That thought was why he sent Emilia out while holding things down with Regulus.

Because he believed that Emilia's earnest pleas could do what his words never would.

"I'm counting on you, Emilia—get those women out of that little kingdom."

3

She could still hear the sounds of a raging battle far in the distance.

"

around buildings, just like she had done when sneaking around the control tower.

"It's a good thing we practiced Icebrand Arts."

It was a training she had started at Subaru's suggestion, but it was not only well suited to her fighting style, it had also been useful in raising the basic level of her admittedly lacking magic, so she was really grateful to Subaru.

Whenever she tried to thank him, though, he would always respond modestly, saying, "It's a coincidence. I just wanted to see you acting like an ice fairy is all."

In any case, because of that daily practice, Emilia had become able to fashion all sorts of things out of ice and not just weapons. Her current method of moving through the city was just one effect of that.

"Create Ice Road…!"

She couldn't get used to the odd phrasing, but basically it was a way of using her magic to freely create a path of ice for herself. She didn't normally use it because it was dangerous with other people around, but this was an emergency situation—

"And it should naturally go away after a little bit of time passes."

Making an excuse for no one in particular, she ran along path after path of ice, heading up into the sky to pass over the city. And surprisingly quickly, she arrived at her destination—

"—Is everyone here?!"

Slipping through the doors that had been kicked open by Subaru and Reinhard, she called out as she ran into the middle of the chapel. She was greeted by the chapel interior still reeling from the destructive forces it had been forced to endure. All the wives were still lining the seats.

"Phew. You were still…"

She breathed a sigh of relief that they were still there, but she didn't finish her sentence, realizing that it was a thoughtless thing for her to say. They were exactly where they had been before. But it was because they had quite literally remained there without moving at all.

They were in the exact same places and the exact same poses with the exact same expressions as when she last saw them. They had waited for their next instruction without moving at all.

"Because Regulus ordered them not to move…?"

Emilia understood it was the effect of a discipline born from raw violence and terror and not some special ability. And that display of absolute obedience reignited her rage at Regulus for having terrified them so badly.

For the moment, however, there was no point in dwelling on that.

“Calm down, Emilia—Subaru is doing his best there, too.”

Taking a deep breath, Emilia quieted her emotions that had started to swell.

Seeing these women and their plight was painful, but the fact that they had remained in the chapel was good news. If they had left and scattered, it would make things even harder.

Because they needed the help of all the wives for their plan.

“Everyone! Please listen to me!”

In order to support Subaru’s valiant fight that she could still hear echoing in the distance, she needed to find an answer as soon as possible.

“

little hope she might have had once had already been betrayed by Emilia before.

So Emilia couldn't blame her for that derisive scoff.

However—

"That sort of laugh doesn't really suit you."

"...My apologies. Despite his admonition, I allowed an unattractive smile to besmirch my face."

"You don't have to apologize. You can laugh at me if you want. I can't say it makes me happy, but I'm used to it."

"

ground.

"I do not know what terrible things you have suffered under Regulus. But even from the short time I've spent with him, I know that Regulus is in the wrong."

Emilia had been abducted while she was unconscious and proposed to the moment she opened her eyes. She had seen him refer to his wives by number and mercilessly attempt to kill one who had failed to meet his standards. And at the wedding ceremony that had started before she even had time to catch her breath, she had reached the limits of her tolerance for being swept along by something so far removed from anything resembling a happy marriage.

Emilia didn't presume that she was the ultimate authority on justice, and she didn't have a fixation on personally righting every wrong, either. But from time to time, she did feel an urge to smack some reality into someone who was wrong.

"I don't want to lose to Regulus. I know that what is right won't be decided by who wins or loses in a fight, but right here and right now, I don't want to lose to him. If I lose to him, I'm sure…I'm sure he won't hesitate to take away something very precious to me."

"Something…precious?"

#184 broke the silence again. Her eyes were still dark as she softly put her own hand to her breast in response to Emilia's earnest plea.

"What is that precious thing? Your life? Do you believe that as long as you are alive, something might come of it?"

"Life is precious. *Really* precious. But that's not everything, right?"

"No, that is in fact all there is. That is all there is to it. At the very least, that is all there is for us and all there has been for a long time. We do not dare hope for anything more than that."

Shaking her head intensely, #184 carefully held the hem of her dress, and she politely curtsied. And every last one of the wives around Emilia did the same.

Emilia's eyes widened at the perfect coordination.

"This is our own form of fighting. Every last thing was stolen from us, and if the one remaining thing, our lives, is stolen, too, then everything will belong to him. That's why…"

"…No matter what, you won't take my hand?"

"It is not as if you are the first ones who have thought to defeat him and free us."

Her head still lowered, #184 responded with a cold, emotionless voice.

Someone who had tried to save them in the past. There was no point in asking what had happened to that person, since they had not been freed and Regulus was still alive and well.

Just like she had felt earlier, there was no disappointment or dejection in #184's voice. Because there had not been any hope then, either.

Their hope had been left waiting too long. But even so, that was hardly their fault.

But they didn't have to be so stubborn in rejecting their own salvation.

"What has happened to your knight and the Sword Saint that was with him? It is surprising they are still alive after having provoked his ire, but…should you not simply escape by yourself?"

"I said it before the wedding, too, but I'm not going to do that. Reinhard is…a little hard to reach at the moment, but Subaru is still doing his best right now. And he's trusting me to do this."

"Do this? Do what? We do not have any value as hostages, as I am sure you are aware."

"Do you really not understand?"

"—?"

#184's brow furrowed in silent confusion.

It was a natural reaction and didn't seem to be an act or anything. Her stubborn resignation made her more philosophical, but she had been somewhat amicable with Emilia. She made no effort to try and save herself or the others, but aside from that, she had even been downright cooperative.

In other words, she, at the very least, didn't know.

Didn't know that they were all being forced to support Regulus's Lion Heart.

"

invincible.

On top of that, he had also detailed that it had something to do with a “time stop,” but honestly that part of it was all gibberish to her. After he laid out the main points, she understood that she had to free the women from Regulus’s kingdom.

“But how do I do that…?”

From #184’s reaction, she didn’t seem to have any awareness that she was part of that kingdom.

Subaru had said that if they could get the women away from Regulus’s kingdom, he would be weakened, but the exact way she should go about that was still not clear to her.

Was it enough to just get them to say for themselves that they were leaving?

“No, there’s no way. It’s not going to be that easy.”

It was unimaginable that a simple statement rejecting the kingdom would be enough to stop being a part of it. Of course, even just saying it would be an important step for them individually.

Most likely there was not some statement that would get them out. It would probably require a genuine wish to be free of it. The desire to be saved.

Had Regulus so thoroughly crushed all their spirits in order to prevent that from happening?

“Ughhhh.”

Emilia’s chest ached as she thought of all of them being so unreasonably and mercilessly crushed under Regulus’s thumb. Emilia stamped her foot in frustration, imagining herself beating Regulus until he was black-and-blue.

But no matter how much she bemoaned things or worried or felt discouraged, the situation wouldn’t suddenly change for the better. She couldn’t do anything other than keep pressing forward.

“Have you ever thought of yourself as someone inside a small kingdom?!”

“…What is that all of a sudden?”

“Please just answer the question.”

Emilia leaned forward suddenly, pressing #184 for an answer. Taken aback by the sudden intensity, she recoiled slightly.

“I was originally from the Kingdom of Lugunica, so I have, but…”

“Oh, right. Lugunica is a kingdom, too, so the terms are probably confusing…ah.”

Her attempt had ended in a failure, but just as she was about to be disappointed, Emilia suddenly looked up.

“What is it?”

#184’s eyes narrowed as Emilia’s round violet eyes focused on her.

“Ummm, could I ask what your name is?”

“

standing there understood the meaning of that confession—that a silver-haired half-demon stood before her.

The effect was dramatic. Her face turned pale before Emilia's eyes.

"I knew you had elf blood…but a silver-haired…half…elf…"

"You're right; all of you and I are different. The environments we grew up in, where we are from, and in all sorts of fundamental ways. And I'm sure I'm a fair bit older than you, too—but that's just normal. It's not anything special. It's only natural that everyone is different."

Thinking back on it, being different had tormented Emilia for a very long time. Assuming that being different meant no one could understand her, that it meant staying far away from everyone, and that being hurt was normal. Using that as an excuse for what happened, believing things would be better if someone could understand her.

Even though she despised being different—being special—so much, she bottled up her emotions.

But she was not like that anymore. Emilia was proud of being special. And she could now see that specialness was not unique to her.

"It's only natural that I'm different. I'm different, but that's okay. Because even if we are different, we can still understand each other, and we can still enjoy *daisukiyaki.*"

"Wh-what are you trying to say?"

"That we are different, but that isn't a problem!"

Emilia's cheeks grew hot as she realized she was just letting her emotions guide her speech. She couldn't let what she wanted to say, what she wanted to convey to them get lost in a mess of words.

That's why she decided to emulate Subaru in order to convey her feelings as directly as possible.

So just like how Subaru had started with her, she simply asked one question.

"—Can you please tell me your name?"

"

anyone, when she felt dizzy from everything going on around her, he was the one who had spoken to her with kindness.

All this time later, thinking back on it, Emilia had been happy in that moment.

She had been happy that a boy she knew nothing about had acknowledged her existence.

—Subaru Natsuki had surely been special to her from that moment on.

And so she wanted to do for them what Subaru had done for her.

"Don't…toy with me…"

The woman's voice trembled, and she was flustered as Emilia looked straight at her.

Gripping her own slender shoulders, as if trying to endure some cold chill, her voice trembled like a leaf. She glared at Emilia with a look of disgust on her face, aggravation in her voice, and loathing in her eyes.

That was the first real, raw emotion that she had revealed to Emilia—

"Why…why must you keep trying to make us human again after everything that's happened?!"

Lamenting the unbearable, she exploded at Emilia in an intense outburst of emotion. She surrendered herself to the torrent of all the emotions she had bottled up as she screamed.

"I was fine not being a person. I was fine being a doll. He is content to just have us being obedient dolls. Letting him play with his dolls was enough to not be killed. Because we believed that was our one small act of resistance…and yet!" She jumped down Emilia's throat. "You are an outsider who knows nothing about us, and you are ruining all the efforts we've made, destroying everything we struggled so desperately for so long to maintain! What do you know about us?!"

"I know that you are kind."

"What do you know about us?!"

"I know that you are *really* earnest."

"What do you know…?!"

"I know that you are crying out for someone to help you."

"—Ah."

Her eyes widened at that, and her lips trembled as if she was gasping for air.

She had never once said anything like that.

Of course not. In all the time they had spent with Regulus, if they had ever once even dared to think it, their hearts would surely have broken from hopelessness, and they wouldn't have been able to endure to this day.

The despair of wanting to be saved and the hope of being rescued were two sides of the same coin.

That hope had been dashed countless times before, and they had long ago given up on any dream of rescue. They instinctively realized that hope was a seed of despair that would only grow into a flower of death if it was nourished.

Because of that, they would never once have asked for someone to save them.

"But your everything is crying out for it. Your eyes, your voice—it's all asking to be saved. So I'm going to help you. I'm going to free you all from Regulus. And in order to do that…"

"

As Emilia stood there with her head still bowed, the woman in front of her spoke, her voice throttling all traces of emotion.

The woman let out a long, deep breath and looked away from Emilia toward the pews. She faced the other wives who had lived in the same environment she had for so long, standing there in perfect order, hesitating.

"There is something I would like to ask. Something I was never able to ask everyone before."

The other wives were silent, and their expressions remained frozen. Raising her head, Emilia couldn't say anything. She could only watch how it unfolded.

In that suffocating silence, the woman who had stood as the representative of all the brides spoke up.

"Is there anyone who likes that man?"

Her question resounded in the silent chapel as she cocked her head.

Emilia raised her eyebrows at the query, and even in their silence, the other wives couldn't help reacting to it, too. They looked at one another, revealing a trace of discomfort and emotion.

Finally, as that mood spread like a ripple, a hoarse voice spilled over—

"…I hate him."

It was not Emilia or the woman who had been called #184. It was the woman with long red hair who had led Emilia into the chapel.

Her firm and stouthearted expression finally broke down. Her eyes were damp as she spoke what lay in her heart.

And those few hoarse words that she managed to squeeze out were the tremor that caused the kingdom to come crashing down.

"I hate him, too." "I hated him." "I always hated him." "I really, really hate him." "What's his problem?" "He's crazy." "Who could possibly like him?" "He only loves himself." "I've mentally rejected him more times than I can count." "I wanted to cry." "But I couldn't." "I hate him." "He should just die in a fire." "I absolutely hate him." "Hate, hate, hate, hate him." "I hate the look in his eyes." "I hate how he talks." "I hate how he walks." "I hate his personality." "He's totally unlovable." "I hate him more today than yesterday." "And I'll hate him even more tomorrow." "He's disgusting." "A freak." "He's like a little kid." "Even worse." "A land dragon would be better than him." "He's awful beyond belief." "I just can't with him." "Gross, gross, gross." "I always wanted to throw up." "I always wished someone would just kill him." "He's the worst." "The absolute worst." "Just being around him makes me sick." "I was always afraid I would rot away where he touched me." "I was dying on the inside." "He murdered my family." "How could I love someone who kidnapped me?" "His potential for evil is unbelievable." "I want him to die the most miserable death possible." "Always running his mouth about something. I wish he would just die every time he says another pointless word." "He can just rot away from the inside out." "Give me back my sweetheart." "I want to go home…" "Forget saving me—just kill him." "That sleazebag." "I hate him! I'll hate him forever!" "There's no woman in the world who could love that thing, is there?" "Not any men, either." "There's no one who could love that thing."

All the emotions they had bottled up came rushing out, like a dam finally bursting.

It was filled with the hatred and grudges that had simmered in their hearts, the resentment and pain that had plagued their bodies and minds for so many years. It was by no means a pleasant thing to hear.

—But even as they said all that, their expressions were refreshingly clear.

"Sylphy."

"Huh?"

Emilia was not sure how to react to that word said by the woman in front of her. The woman who was not #184 or a bride shook her head.

"It's what you asked for. My name is Sylphy."

"…That's a *really* nice name."

"Right? It was my mother's name, and her mother's name as well."

The woman, Sylphy, seemed to be recalling memories of her family as she answered. And then she gestured all around the chapel.

"We were all in agreement, but no one ever said anything."

"Do you have something you want to say, too?"

"Yes, I do."

Sylphy nodded. She was the only one who had not said anything as everyone else had voiced their own confessions.

Brushing her beautiful golden-blond hair, she beamed, happily discarding the order not to smile as she flashed a blindingly beautiful smile for the first time in who knew how long.

"I absolutely despise that man—please let us help you."

And she added her name to the divorce papers with a smile.

4

"That man's…kingdom…"

"Right. All of you should be a part of that kingdom in some way. If we can get you out of it…"

"We can get away from that scumbag's control."

After Emilia gave a general summary, Sylphy expressed an extraordinarily high level of understanding as she murmured to herself.

Sylphy and the other former brides had unanimously agreed to help Emilia. Looking around at them, Emilia had started to explain how to shatter the foundations of Regulus's power.

But the problem was…

"It's hard to imagine he would entrust us with something that important."

"I don't know. I don't think that underhanded coward has the guile to do something like that."

"We're citizens of this kingdom, right? What does that even mean?"

"Maybe having something that he gave you makes you count as a member of the kingdom…"

"Disgusting."

"Take off our clothes and all the jewelry…"

"Being that man's property for even one more second is disgusting! I'd rather be naked!"

"I understand the feeling, but let's calm down!"

After appeasing the chaotic group of women, Emilia and Sylphy managed to get everyone to sit and started talking things through. But it didn't fundamentally change that to some greater or lesser extent, their hearts had been worn down, and they struggled to stay composed in their agitated state.

What Emilia could gather from everything they said was how cruelly Regulus had coerced them and that they despised him on a deep, visceral level.

It was all Regulus's just deserts as far as she was concerned, but it was clouding their eyes, and she couldn't make light of the possibility that it was distracting them from getting to the bottom of things.

What if Regulus had always been acting like that expressly to cause this sort of problem if something like this ever did happen?

"No, that man is not nearly so wise as to think that far ahead."

"I guess so… But is there anything else we can think of?"

There was no defending how Regulus had acted, but they had to find a way to undermine his power in order to win.

Emilia racked her brain as Sylphy and the others did their best to puzzle it out as well.

They were desperately trying, believing in the possibility that there was some clue to figuring out his power hiding in some offhand comment or odd behavior that Regulus had let slip in all the miserable, painful days they had endured.

"

But correcting him, giving him a shoulder to lean on, and helping him were just more expressions of her trust in him.

"Subaru said that Regulus's wives held the key to Lion Heart…"

Touching her lips as she slipped into thought, she went back over the explanation she had heard from Subaru again.

Stopping time, his heart not beating, his wives being crucial, Regulus being a bad person—all these factors were swirling in her head.

Authorities were mysterious powers that were different from and more special than blessings.

"If only I knew more about blessings…"

Unfortunately, Emilia didn't have a blessing, so she didn't have intimate knowledge or experience of what it was like to have one. It would have been nice if Otto or Garfiel were there to explain, but there was nothing to do about that.

She tried to use her imagination to make up the difference, envisioning a meaner, worse Otto and Garfiel to try to get closer to Regulus, who had a power that was more unique than a blessing.

"A bad Otto…would refuse to talk things through, or stay up all night, or always pester Frederica and the others…I guess? And a bad Garfiel would scratch up all the walls maybe…?"

That was the limits of her imagination in picturing the two of them as bad people. They were just too good to begin with, so she couldn't imagine them being evil.

"

slipped under every one of the women in the building. As they answered back one after the other, the very last spirit gave her the response she was looking for.

"I knew it!"

Emilia suddenly shouted in a loud voice, causing Sylphy to spin around. Noticing her reaction, she started to walk over to Emilia.

"What is it? Did you realize something?"

"Ummm, ummm, maybe! There's something I want to double-check, though. Could you help me, Sylphy?"

"Of course. I'll assist you however I can."

Emilia was getting a bit flustered, but Sylphy nodded reassuringly and put her hand on her shoulder. The other women all nodded, too, standing up straight and waiting to hear how they could help.

Emilia nodded back.

"Okay, then—please excuse me."

"Of course, go… Eeep?!"

Sylphy's obedient expression fell apart the moment Emilia did something totally unexpected. After a brief moment, Sylphy's snow-like cheeks slowly turned red.

That was an entirely reasonable reaction because Emilia had put her hand right against Sylphy's breast without a moment's hesitation, touching the bare skin beneath the dress and running her hand all over Sylphy's chest.

"—Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm."

"Eh? Um, uh? This is, *eep,* ummm…"

"Please stay still. This is *really* important."

"I-important? What is…?"

Sylphy's face turned red as an apple while Emilia had her way with her. But Emilia was entirely serious, and she paid no heed to Sylphy's embarrassment.

"I'm checking the sound of your heart."

"My…heart…?"

Sylphy's expression froze at that unexpected response. Emilia nodded in confirmation.

"Just now, I asked the lesser spirits to check the flow of everyone's mana. And your heart was the only one that seemed strange…"

"It's a little scary to be told that about my heart…"

But she seemed to realize the situation was serious despite

Emilia's odd choice of words. And as the rest of the women around them wore worried expressions, Emilia carefully examined her pulse.

Placing her hand firmly against Sylphy's breast, she focused, listening to the *one-two*, *one-two* of her pulse.

The heartbeat conveyed unease and tension, and as she felt it with her hand, Emilia realized something. There was an entirely different pulse intertwined with Sylphy's heartbeat—

"How awful."

After a moment of reflection, Emilia instinctively understood what was happening.

At the same time, she was painfully aware of the true impact of the meaning behind Sylphy calling Regulus a little king and Subaru saying the world he ruled was a kingdom.

Regulus's Lion Heart was merged with Sylphy's heart.

In other words—

"Regulus can attach his heart to the hearts of the people he has decided are his wives!"

5

Subaru's death-defying attempts to stall for time had already lasted for more than ten minutes.

"Focus! Focus! Focus!"

Breathing heavily, his mind raced as he concentrated every function of his mind and body on evasion.

Drawing a rather miraculous flight, Subaru managed to barely escape the destruction Regulus spread and still keep running.

Pristella's third district was a terrible sight to behold after he and Regulus had passed through.

The famous picturesque scenery had been utterly ruined, like a miniature display broken by a child's tantrum, and there were pockets of flooding from all the broken waterways.

But even so, it was a mark of pride for Subaru that he was following the map in his head, avoiding the shelters so that the people of the city wouldn't be caught up in Regulus's violent rampage.

"In consideration of your caliber, why don't you just give up and let yourself die already?!"

"Graaaaaaah!"

The merciless kick crashed through a dreadfully beautiful building. It lost balance and crashed helplessly into all the houses around it. Intentionally dashing into the rising dust cloud, Subaru used the improvised concealment to escape Regulus's eyes as he continued to run away on a battlefield now devoid of readily usable traps.

It was a flight that took advantage of Regulus's pointless obsessions. The Archbishop of Greed despised the idea of his enemy dying somewhere where he couldn't see it happen. It was an expression of his twisted need for recognition that he had to prove his strength by crushing any who opposed him head-on and watching them break before his eyes.

Because of that, Regulus could be stalled by intentionally leaping into a smoke screen.

"That's right—keep following me, dumbass! I'm not scared of you!"

Subaru kept running, lobbing taunts at a Regulus who he couldn't see on the other side of the thick clouds.

This was the correct way of fighting Regulus. All the people who had fallen trying to destroy Greed had been defeated because they were brave. They should have been weak and frail and focused on running away like cowards the whole time.

If they had, they wouldn't have lost to such a pathetic man.

"Every last one of you! When will you figure it out! We're different! Everyone is born possessing different qualities! You can't hope to match or reach a complete person such as myself! Just accept that you are lacking, find some satisfaction in that realization, and then die!"

"—!"

Subaru gritted his teeth bitterly as a shock wave suddenly crashed into him from an unexpected angle. He couldn't avoid it completely and got blown away as the destruction it caused spread.

And—

"Ha! You had your fun running around all you liked, but when you finally did fall, it was over all too soon."

Breaking through the cloud of dust, Regulus appeared, his face twisted into a proud, triumphant smirk. Before him, Subaru lay on the ground next to the rubble of a building, groaning with his face half covered in blood.

"Agh…"

“Well, that’s just how it goes. It was destined to end this way. Considering the gap between you and me, perhaps this is just the natural result that was always bound to occur. Now I don’t have to irrationally preoccupy myself with you any longer. Ahhh, three cheers indeed for a world made right.”

Regulus made a show of crushing the rubble underfoot as he walked over to where Subaru lay, as if to say Subaru’s head would be next.

“By the by, do you not find yourself terribly presumptuous? There have been more than a few people like you who got all riled up trying to defeat me. But none of them managed to leave even a scratch on me. That’s what happens when you wish for something beyond your ability. It is natural providence.”

Feigning his own lack of worldly desires, the Archbishop of Greed was confident in his assessment that excessive avarice was what invited destruction.

Greed gave rise to vain conflicts, and desire for possessions spawned an endless thirst for more, which simply led to the ultimate tragedy. He was babbling about how a lack of desire was actually the most precious thing, about how honorable poverty was the way of life people should aspire to.

Not that he lived by those words. He simply forced that lack of desire onto others.

“It’s a wonderful thing to be content within yourself. A man’s reach should not extend his grasp. To do otherwise leads to nothing but destruction. No one ever learns anything, though. You are all incorrigible fools. It is a sad thing in truth.”

Regulus ran his hand through his white hair, basking in the dramatic moment.

The lamentation in his voice was not fabricated. He quite genuinely grieved and pitied the foolishness of Subaru and everyone other than himself.

And with that pitying gaze looking down from on high, Regulus glared at Subaru, who was struggling to breathe.

“Now, tell me where that unfaithful woman is. Do so, and I shall grant you an easy death. I don’t have the sort of proclivities that inspire me to torture my enemies to death. I told you, did I not? I am a merciful man.”

“If you’re so merciful…you wouldn’t…use your power…on your brides…”

"Hmm? Ahhh yes. So you realized that much? You're a cunning man. My Lion Heart… Where did you hear that anyway? …But in the end, it still amounts to nothing more than one more vain struggle."

Instead of getting enraged, the corners of Regulus's mouth curled upward after hearing the ragged response from Subaru. He was in a good mood, smiling scornfully at Subaru's struggling.

"It is true, my Authority is related to my wives. My condolences, though, because you cannot reach my wives, and even if you could, you wouldn't be able to do anything."

"…Because they won't betray you?"

"It's much simpler than that—I have entrusted my most precious heart with my wives. Neither I nor my wives know who among them carries it."

Subaru was speechless at his casual indifference.

Regulus's Lion Heart—in order to keep that power active, he also needed his Little King power. Subaru's analysis had been correct on that point. However, the form of the connection between the two was far more malicious than he could have imagined.

"My wives' rights are equal, my love for them is equal, and the responsibilities they bear are divided fairly among them as well. That's the bare minimum requirement for a man who takes multiple wives, is it not? I love my wives so much that I quite literally entrust my heart to them."

"If none of them has realized it, then…"

"No one pays attention to the beat of their own heart day in and day out, after all."

Seeing that villainous smirk again, it finally dawned on Subaru. The crafty way that Regulus hid his heart. It was simple and effective, and more than anything, there was no way to combat it.

"It is a wife's job to manage her husband's wealth. But I am not a greedy man. I do not possess the sort of meaningless wealth that rubes like you get so obsessed over. So what I gave my wives is my very self. The ultimate expression of love, wouldn't you agree?"

The very idea was hideous.

Regulus acknowledged the vicious betrayal he had perpetrated as if it was entirely natural, without a trace of malice or the slightest pang of guilt.

His evil surpassed what Subaru had imagined. When he sent Emilia to the chapel, he had given her a handful of different theories to work with for trying to solve the riddle of Regulus's Lion Heart. But he had not envisioned this development.

"…There's a way to deal with this. But there's no way Emilia can do it."

If the explanation Regulus had given with that shit-eating grin was true, then there was one way to neutralize his power. Subaru could think of a way. If he could get the message to Emilia, then it would theoretically be possible to defeat Regulus.

The problem had nothing to do with finding a solution, though. It had to do with actually carrying it out.

—Because it meant choosing to kill his wives.

"Hah? What are you…?"

Regulus looked confused as Subaru let out a deep breath and slowly stood up.

Subaru, who had collapsed and been struggling to breathe, righted himself and brushed off his clothes and then slowly wiped the blood from his face. Regulus was shocked, but Subaru just shrugged.

"I was just playing dead…well, playing almost dead, I guess. I got cut on the forehead, and the blood made it look a lot worse than it really was, so I figured it was worth a shot."

"—!"

"I had faith in you. I was sure you were the sort of idiot who would start monologuing if you saw your enemy on the verge of dying."

And Regulus had played right into his hand. All it had taken was spreading some blood over his face and acting like he was barely holding on. Thanks to that, he had gotten confirmation of Regulus's power. Even if it was a terrible thing to know, it was better than staying in the dark.

"How much of a fool must you make of me before you're satisfied?!"

All of the superiority Regulus had been oozing just moments ago was gone, swallowed up in a rage as he charged straight at Subaru.

Despite his amateur stance and bearing, his speed was beyond all reason. Every once in a while, Regulus had displayed an ability to instantaneously accelerate that had shocked even Reinhard. However, now that Subaru knew what his power was, he also understood the trick behind that.

“Fgh!”

That moment, he unleashed all the power he had built up in his right leg, not hesitating as he leaped to the side, dodging in the exact way he had planned before even standing up. Since Regulus could only dash straight forward, his attack completely missed.

Regulus’s superhuman change was also an effect of stopping time for his body.

By freezing time for his body, he could prevent all physical phenomena from interacting with him. That was the crux of his power. That meant freedom from every possible concept that might hold him back.

By freeing himself from gravity, air resistance, and conservation of momentum, Regulus gained an extraordinary source of power. But the fact that he didn’t use it more often was probably because he couldn’t fully control it himself—

“Don’t mess with me! Who do you think I am?!”

“The dictionary definition of an absolute piece of shit! I have to let Emilia know…”

Dodging Regulus’s latest attack, Subaru flipped the howling villain off and then spun around.

He had finally pinned down Regulus’s Lion Heart and Little King. He just needed to get the information to Emilia somehow. Get her the answer to make a choice.

In order to save the town, to save Emilia—

“

after confirming Sylphy's unnatural pulse.

Unsurprisingly, a nervous, uneasy mood swelled in the air when she said that—

"M-my heart…and…?"

Sylphy, in particular—the one whose heart had become host to Regulus's pulse—was in shambles.

She blanched, and if Emilia had not supported her, she might well have collapsed to the floor. Her already naturally pale expression turned a pallid, sickly color as she tried several times to speak before finally getting the words out.

"There's no…mistaking it?"

It was a whisper softer than a baby bird's warble.

Even knowing that it would be a painful truth, Emilia nodded.

"…The lesser spirits said it was a weird heartbeat, and I could feel it with my palm, too. I could hear something overlapping with your heartbeat."

"…How much must that man trample on people's hearts…!"

She clenched her chest as her voice quivered with rage and hatred. And then—

"I see. So in the end, I should have just done this from the start."

"—! Wait! What are you going to do?!"

Sylphy's face warped bitterly as she reached down to the ground.

Her white fingers picked up a shard of glass that had once been a part of the chapel's broken windows. There were hundreds of them scattered all around from when Reinhard's first attack had destroyed half the building. Picking it up, Sylphy smiled as she held the sharp edge to her neck.

"How ironic. I spent so long studying that man's moods because I didn't want to be killed by him… All so I could read what he wanted like a book."

"Did Regulus tell you to…?"

"No, no, that isn't it at all. His scheme was something else entirely—he was constantly pushing his own weakness onto us, the ones he called his wives, in order to force this choice."

Emilia couldn't understand what Sylphy was saying as she smiled almost self-deprecatingly. But she realized that Sylphy shouldn't be allowed to look like that. It was not the sort of smile she should have, and there was no reason she had to experience something that made her feel that way.

“The only way to stop that man’s heart is to stop my heart along with it. Would any good person who heard that really be able to make that choice?”

“—Ah.”

“I suppose he would probably say something like ‘not even death can tear us apart.’”

Having it spelled out that explicitly, Emilia finally understood Regulus’s evil intent. Sylphy had deeply studied his personal brand of malice after years of living with him. Because of that, she also realized that there was no escape—

“No! Please wait! There has to be another way. I’m sure if—”

“There is no magic solution to this. That man would never provide any sort of way out. There is no way to stop only half of a heart.”

“How can you just give up like that?! I don’t want that! If I just let this happen… Then why did I leave the forest in the first place…?!”

Sylphy had already made up her mind, and Emilia’s pleas echoed hollowly.

Another victim? Another person who couldn’t be saved because of Emilia’s ignorance and lack of strength?

Just like everyone in the forest. Just like Fortuna and Geuse.

People around her were giving up their lives in order to make up for Emilia’s shortcomings.

“Being chosen by that man, being carried off…they were truly miserable days.”

While Emilia desperately searched for another way, Sylphy’s voice regained its calm. As if she had made her peace with the end that awaited her.

Step by step, in order to bring those long misfortunate days to an end.

“I was so desperate not to invoke that man’s anger. I overlooked all that man’s injustices, just trying to protect the newer wives…the girls who were in the same boat as I was. Just like the wives before did for me.”

That was the real reason why Sylphy had taken the initiative and acted like a representative for Regulus’s wives.

There had been others like that before her, too. Someone who had stood at the head in order to protect the wives who had triggered Regulus's temper and lost their lives to protect the rest of the group. Sylphy had inherited that will, and that was why so many of the current wives were still alive.

Indeed, the fact that Emilia was able to be there like that was because of Sylphy's determination, too.

"Even if that man trampled my heart, he wouldn't meddle with my body… If he had corrupted both, I wouldn't have been able to take it. Because of that, I endured everything that man said, as well as his voice and his awful treatment. I endured and endured and endured…and for what!"

Sylphy bit her lip as she stared up toward the heavens. There were tears in her eyes, and even the tears themselves seemed to have a violent, burning anger to them.

"That man violated my body so nonchalantly! I thought at least my body would be left alone! But he couldn't even give me that much! We were always that man's slaves!"

The tears fell as blood seeped from her hand that was clenched around the glass, her fingers quivering in anger as it bit deeper into her skin. Her face twisted in pain, but her lips softened in satisfaction at the flowing blood.

"That man would consider us worthless and kill us if we got even a single scrape. 'A woman with a scar is unworthy.' So this cut is proof of my freedom."

"

Her eyes were alive with emotion again as she reflected on the hard days she had been forced to live through.

"I've wanted to die countless times before. Telling myself that going on like this couldn't really be called living. In which case I would rather just meet my family again sooner on the other side…"

"The only reason I didn't already do it is because I didn't want to die… Even if death would free me from this misery, it was scary to imagine the nothingness swallowing me up."

"But if dying…if my death can cause that man even just a tiny bit of pain…if my death won't be in vain, then…"

One after the other, the women walked out from the pews and picked up shards of their own. They advanced as if those sharp points of glass represented hope for them. As if to say that Emilia's words had allowed them to find hope, to find a purpose for their lives.

"…There is no mistaking that that man does not have any other wives than us. He is not clever or careful enough to hide one away. As his wife, I can guarantee that. So let's end this with us." Sylphy paused for a second. "Ironic, since our existence as his wives itself is proof of his sins."

And then, with trembling breath, Sylphy bowed her head in Emilia's direction.

"I beg of you—make sure our rage reaches that man. We rejected that man even though he wanted us. You are the only one we can turn to."

Sylphy's earnest plea wounded Emilia gently yet deeply.

When she said that, she and the others gripped the shards of glass in their hands and held them to their necks. They all were united as they—

"—Wait."

Emilia interrupted their resolute decisions.

Having been silent throughout, there was a strength in her voice. That extended beyond her emotions as physical hands of ice extended from the floor and held back all their arms.

She forcefully prevented them from cutting their own throats with the shards of glass.

"Please understand! I appreciate your sentiments, but there isn't any other way!"

Sylphy's eyes went wide as she struggled against Emilia's interference. They couldn't see any way to get vengeance except through their own deaths. They couldn’t hurt Regulus without using up their own lives.

That was the conclusion she had reached. So for that sake, they had to stop their own hearts. They had to die. Emilia understood the painful answer they had arrived at. And to disprove that conclusion, she had thought and thought and thought as hard as she could in order to find some other way.

So—

“I’m sorry. It’s not that.”

“What…?”

“I wonder if Subaru would have thought of something…but I’m not smart enough. Even after thinking *really* hard, I couldn’t come up with any other way. So…”

Countless pale gleams danced in the air around Emilia.

The sparkling lights were the lesser spirits materializing after having gathered mana. They filled the entire interior of the chapel, an enormous number, creating an almost divine spectacle.

Sylphy gulped at the fantastical scene that had sprung up around them as Emilia continued.

“I will stop your hearts.”

“

CHAPTER 4

LILIANA MASQUERADE

1

“Lady Priscilla?!”

Liliana’s scream filled the plaza in front of the control tower that was surrounded by red-and-white flames, which kept out over a thousand rioters.

Priscilla had held the upper hand against Sirius up until that shout.

In fact, Priscilla had charged forward at unbelievable speeds, and her sword had been just on the verge of removing Sirius’s head. The slash had contained tremendous power, and Liliana had been holding her breath, watching it unfold.

But a mysterious phenomenon had happened that should not have been possible.

“

would be in danger.

But right as Liliana cried out, Priscilla spun her body as she flew through the air and thrust her Sunlight Blade into the ground to kill her momentum. When she stopped, she looked up.

“Calm thyself. I am unhurt.”

“E-ehhhhh?! But how?!”

The chain had left no visible injury. And just as Liliana started to think that Priscilla had escaped unscathed, one of the three jewels in Priscilla’s necklace suddenly shattered. It seemed very much like it had taken the damage Priscilla would have sustained—

“…Compensation for my necklace will not come cheaply.”

“I see—so you are able to have things that you value take damage in your stead? Well, well, that is rather haughty, a truly *prideful* way of life… No, that can’t be, can it?”

“A boorish supposition and the pinnacle of unjust suspicion. Summing up the totality of the discourtesies you have perpetrated thus far, not even ten thousand deaths will be enough to atone. An incandescent flame that burns without end will spell your doom.”

Sirius’s tranquil stance was unchanged while Priscilla’s intensity and ire rose in unison. The shine of the Sunlight Blade in her hands increased gradually as well. The sword had been glowing a bright red, but it gradually grew more and more brilliant, until it was a bright white like pure sunlight.

There was no mistaking that Priscilla’s temper was directly related to the attack that had just happened. But it felt like her true anger was connected to the exchange that had preceded that attack.

“‘Iris and the Thorn King’…”

And then “Teleos’s Rose Knight” and “Magritzer’s Gibbet.”

That was what Sirius had said, but they were all names of quite famous stories. They had all long since been turned to verse, and Liliana had even earned her daily bread performing them before.

So why had Priscilla flared up after hearing the names of those stories?

“Please don’t be so angry. It’s tiresome to get so angry, and it leaves your heart so parched, doesn’t it? Wrath is the most detestable emotion in this world. Emotion is what fills people’s hearts… They should be joyous and at ease. Would you really disagree with that?”

“Th-the people out there sure don’t seem to be enjoying themselves.”

"Hmmm?"

"W-wait! D-did I just say that out loud?!"

Sirius's curious gaze flitted over to Liliana, who had interjected without thinking. The dark-purple eyes peering through the gaps in the bandages met Liliana's gaze, and the Songstress immediately felt her knees start to tremble.

Sirius smiled faintly at that excessive reaction.

"It's true. Right now their hearts are influenced by unease and grief. It is a sad thing, but…at the same time, it is also proof that people's hearts are filled with affection and love for others."

"Wh-what?!"

"Under the influence of my power, people become able to open their hearts to one another in a true sense of the phrase. With that, they can share the emotions they are feeling, things that can't be put into words. People are noble creatures capable of empathy and sympathy. They can understand the feelings of others. They can share in the same grief that someone near them experiences. And by overlaying all that understanding, it becomes possible to share in all feelings—a truly mutual understanding, which is the natural first step toward love."

There was ecstasy in Sirius's eyes as she expounded on love.

—Her logic was a sweet poison.

Even knowing it was a poison, many gave in to temptation when they came face-to-face with its sickly sweetness, which weakened their resolve as they wished desperately for salvation. To brush it off required an unbending sense of self like Priscilla.

Or else…

"Eh? Are you stupid?"

Liliana looked up at Sirius as she said that.

"…Huh?"

"Are you perchance an utter idiot? Ummm, can you not see them? The people around us? Can you not hear them?"

Liliana gestured to the surroundings with her lyulyre as Sirius's eyes widened in shock. The people on the other side of the white blaze, the milling crowd unable to clear the burning waters. They had lost all self-awareness in the overflowing, unsolicited torrent of emotions, battered by impulses and completely in Sirius's thrall.

"You call that understanding one another? Is that what empathy is supposed to look like?"

As a minstrel, Liliana's ears were special.

She was capable of hearing the unique voices of a thousand people at the same time. There was an infinite variety of voices that could be similar without being exactly the same. And the same was true for emotions.

Because people could laugh even when they were sad. And every smile was different.

And yet…

“It’s disgusting.”

A manufactured equality, a forced synchronization, the implanted idea that being the same was a blessing.

To her ears, it all sounded like a hideous, abhorrent grudge.

“Don’t you dare call *that* understanding. Manipulating people by forcing emotions on them isn’t empathy—it’s absurd!”

Liliana’s shoulders were heaving as a visceral loathing welled up inside her.

“If you really want to share your emotions with someone, then just shut up and listen to my music!”

She was breathing heavily. Sirius was stunned by the force of her response, by the rejection of her venomous temptation. Stunned that it had been brushed off not by Priscilla with her steely individualism but by Liliana. And not out of some formidable sense of self but by the minstrel pride that drove Liliana.

“

For the first time, Sirius's composure cracked. She put her hand to her face and started muttering madly.

She seemed to want to explain her own impulsive action. But just like Priscilla said, there was not really any other explanation besides Liliana's inconvenient response had touched a nerve.

"Allow me to explain it for you. There was no reason. Just now, you heard something that was disagreeable to you. And that enraged you. That's all it was. Just cheap wrath."

"Do not sully my and that person's wrath! It is nothing so tawdry!"

The golden chains clanged in response to Sirius's rage once more. Priscilla still wore a mocking smirk on her face as she spun her Sunlight Blade and met the attack, advancing while parrying. Intense sparks exploded as the stones of the plaza flipped, exploded, and cracked beneath the force of the dance between sword and chain.

The golden chains flashing in the night sky, the white blaze that didn't burn, and the unvoiced cries of the people.

And at the center of it all, the crimson woman and the mysterious woman covered in bandages swung, glared, and tried to kill each other—

"Wrath is the one and only irreplaceable gift I received from my husband! The treasure that he chose for me and me alone…!"

"All you were given by your husband was anger? That's quite the joke. I have had eight husbands, but they all plied me with gift after gift in order to keep my interest."

"Eight…! Even though I've spent so much time trying so hard to connect with just that one man's heart!"

"Do not blame me for your own lack of charm. Indeed, I question whether that pitiful man you loved even had eyes for you."

"The two of us forged deep bonds and loved each other with our whole beings! Argh!"

Revealing a rage far more intense than any other yet, flames engulfed Sirius's entire body. The bright red flames spread from her arms to her chains, and an intense wave of heat washed over Priscilla.

The chains clad in flame snapped at her incessantly, like fiery snakes chasing their prey.

Swallowed up in the resulting fiery blast, even Priscilla had no way out. She was sent flying by the violent explosion, but she thrust her Sunlight Blade into the ground, refusing to fall.

The jewels on her necklace audibly shattered, and then the clasp itself burst, leaving her neck defenseless.

“That man and I loved each other deeply! But he was a faithful, upright, and sincere man, so he couldn’t abandon partway that which he had already started! There are far too many harlots who mistake his sincerity for innocent love and simply bask in his kindness! Ahhh, ahhh! So aggravating, so deplorable, so horrid!”

Priscilla had prevented most of the damage she would’ve sustained at the cost of her necklace. Meanwhile Sirius’s swelling rage seemed like it could grow without end, summoning a swirling scarlet inferno in response to her intense emotion.

Its power would turn any half-hearted resistance to ash in an instant.

“Why must you all so heedlessly batter my heart?! An intense, heart-trembling emotion, namely Wrath! Those trembles become a roaring flame that incinerates criminals along with their sins! Is that what you wish for, you self-satisfied vixens?!”

“Where do you get off with that prattle, fool?”

Sirius swung her arms, setting the serpents of fire roaring above her head as the Wrath she hated so engulfed her. The chains crackled, clad in a red flame, burning everything in their path as they closed in on Priscilla.

“

then and there.

For the arrogant, vainglorious, self-centered Priscilla to do that —

"You impossible-to-understand, voluptuous…!"

Liliana stomped in frustration at how much Priscilla concealed herself and her thoughts. For her to focus on stalling for time when it was so unsuited to her was a testament to how much she trusted Liliana's song.

"So annoying! If you like it, then just say so already! Wait, she did say she liked it before, right? Damn it! Arrrgh! —Lady Priscilla!"

"—Oh."

After plenty of pointless talking, Liliana called out to Priscilla and signaled one point. Noticing that, Priscilla's red eyes narrowed. And with a malicious smile that didn't pale in comparison to the Archbishop she was fighting, she nodded.

"Don't look away from me! Not when my Wrath is about to scorch you to the bone!"

"Do not assume I need my full attention to deal with the likes of you. You have no place to comment on what I do."

Catching the intense chain of fire against the flat of her blade, the pavement beneath her shattered from the unbelievable impact. The next instant, she leaped into the air, landing right next to the burning control tower.

She thrust her Sunlight Blade at the foot of the tall burning tower.

"It is an unsightly blaze, so allow me to demonstrate how it is done, as the trailblazer of fire."

Touting a sense of aesthetics for arson incomprehensible to anyone else, Priscilla transformed the flames.

The bright red blaze that had shrouded the control tower became the same white-hot inferno that was still burning the canals. Unlike Sirius's sinister fire, it almost seemed to give off a holy glow.

A beautiful white flame that anyone would hesitate to sully—

"The stage is set—now amuse me."

"Leave it to me!"

Liliana ran at full speed toward that tower of flames that regular folks would hesitate to touch. Seeing that, Sirius, who at this point was erupting in rage at every little thing, reached out toward Liliana's back.

"What are you doing to the light of love I share with him?!"

"Courting someone by setting fire to an entire building is the sort of ridiculous gesture a villain in a story might think up, and you should probably stop doing things like that! Ha-ha! I said it! I actually said it!"

Liliana laughed as she ran while Sirius's chain homed in on her back. But she never looked back. She didn't pay it any mind at all.

Because—

"—Whatever she does, she does with my approval. Withdraw at once, fool."

Running past Liliana, Priscilla stood right in front of the chain. Her Sunlight Blade swung horizontally, scorching the air in its path while cutting down the fire snake that hung over Liliana's head.

As the flames scattered, Priscilla slipped through the shower of sparks and clashed once again with Sirius. Ignoring the crashes and bangs she could hear behind her, Liliana finally reached the burning tower.

"Agh, I'm already tired after just a little running. I've taken it too easy since settling down here…!"

When she had been a traveling minstrel, sleeping out in the fields and on mountains had been an everyday affair. But after indulging in the easy life in Pristella, she couldn't even fall asleep without the help of a soft bed anymore.

"This is all his and everyone else's fault."

Kiritaka had stopped her in this city, welcomed her as a diva, convinced multiple people to pamper her, and then Kiritaka had pursued her with a zeal that made even Liliana recoil.

Because of that, Liliana's legs were grumbling. It was bad enough she couldn't call herself a traveling minstrel anymore.

—Time to remember what it really means to use these legs again.

"Ghhh!"

Steeling her resolve, Liliana held her lyulyre as she leaped into the burning tower. In an instant, her little body was surrounded by an unbelievably intense heat. But she didn't scream out in pain from the heat licking at her body. She refused to do something that would hurt her throat.

"—gh, gi…"

The white flame enveloping the tower mercilessly seared Liliana's spirit. But that was all it did. The fire didn't burn her skin, hair, or lyulyre. It was a merciless yet kind flame.

The white inferno burning on the water had not burned her skin either when she touched it before. The same thing was occurring with the flames consuming the whole of the tower.

Priscilla's flames were a pure white that burned only what she chose—they were symbolic of Priscilla Bariel's own character.

Because of that, Liliana was free to race up the burning tower once it had been transformed from a red to a white flame.

However, it was still deadly hot. It was painful and agonizing. She wanted to writhe in pain. But she didn't burn, she was not scorched, and she was not going to die.

Even though she could swear her eyes would melt, her tongue would sizzle, her hair would burn, her skin would char, her bones would burst, her flesh would sear, and her consciousness would fade, she was undoubtedly safe and sound. Her only purpose was singing—

“

so scalding hot, and the white flames only grew stronger with each gust of wind, forcibly piercing her heart with sadness. Biting down on it, she faced forward—

"*Sniff, sniff*…a-all right, this is a once-in-a-lifetime big-time stage!"

It was so hot and painful, she was sure she was going to die.

She had pressed on even while thinking that. Because she could look out at everyone from this vantage point. Because her voice could reach everyone from this stage.

It felt like she was going to die, but there was still something she had to do before she died—

"Hear ye, everyone at the back! And those up close, watch my dance closely! And for those way in the back, I'll be raising my voice, so you listen, too! Liliana Masquerade shall perform a song and a dance for you! Lend me your ears for 'Beyond Daybreak'!"

—I'll cram all these feelings into it!

2

As it turned out, Liliana didn't remember what had compelled her to first take up singing.

Liliana's family—going back to her mother's mother and her mother before her, and even her mother before her—had been a family that traveled the world without staying long in any one place and singing wherever they decided to rest their heads.

Traveling minstrels grew bored quickly and staying put for long was bad for business. Living like a tumbleweed drifting wherever the wind blew was far more suited to their lifestyle. There were some who gathered into groups, forming a troupe to perform their acts, but Liliana was not really the sort to enjoy being one face in a crowd. She didn't hate being around other people, but it didn't fit her character, either. Frankly, she would just end up breaking up with a group over differences in sound.

Because of that, Liliana had set off alone, just like her parents had in their youth.

She left the nest when she was just thirteen. Even for a family of minstrels, a group notoriously happy to live and let live, setting out at such a young age was still considered quite early. If anything, it was terribly rash.

"Who asked you?! Who wants to waste away in a place like this?! You two do what you want! I'm going to the city!"

And as a result of that minor squabble, Liliana followed her dream and flew the nest. At the tender age of thirteen, she had broken up with her family over differences in musical ideals.

The reason it had come to that was because of Liliana's psychological maturity back then.

Around when she turned ten, all she wanted was to be independent. Not out of rebelliousness toward her parents. If anything, it was the opposite. By the age of ten, the young Liliana was incredibly developed. Her heart had been set aflutter by the countless tales of adventure her father had played and her mother had sung. Her inspiration was the innumerable tales minstrels had passed down through the generations.

At the time, the people who appeared in her mother's songs were like idols to her. The more she grew to know their adventures and challenges, their fights and loves, their conflicts and self-restraint, the more unbearable she found being stuck in one place.

Not when the people I knew so well through songs could live so freely.

To the ten-year-old Liliana, the heroes and legends of myth and song were her friends.

The urge to walk the same roads they walked, to see the same scenes they saw, to be out under the same sky that they all peered up at. The urge to experience some of what they had lived through consumed her.

If anything, she wanted to congratulate herself for enduring those urges for three whole years.

Motivated by the passion welling up inside and her one-sided sense of comradery with the characters in those stories—after metaphorically stealing her father's lyulyre playing technique and her mother's singing voice and a great many famous songs and then physically stealing the legendary lyulyre passed down in her family as an heirloom—Liliana set out into the world the night she turned thirteen.

"Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha! I'll show you, Mom and Dad! I'm gonna be the queen of minstrels!"

Her parents hunted her down through the mountains for three days and three nights, but after finally shaking them, Liliana won her freedom at last.

That night was the beginning of Liliana Masquerade's great adventure.

—Thinking back on it now, my parents had been holding me back at the time because of how much they loved me.

From the age of ten, her parents had crushed her ambition to go out on her own with all their strength. They pointed out where she was lacking in skill, laughed out loud at how lazy she was about studying the songs, and occasionally they even made her go without food.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! A little slip of a girl like you is a decade too early to be going out on your own! I'm not going to share this rabbit I trapped with such an impudent brat!"

"Oh dear, what a shame! And today's rabbit meat made such a nice stew! I feel sorry for any child who refused to listen to her parents!"

For better or worse, they were still her parents. They had surely been troubled when Liliana left.

"We can save on food costs now! That girl always ate a bit too much!"

"With Liliana gone, hmm, maybe we could have another child, ha-ha-ha!"

They had to have been troubled. They must have regretted it. Surely…

And that last family spat had been their final gift to Liliana.

By cutting off her escape route like that, they had steeled her resolve so she wouldn't give up easily, since after parting like that, it would be so hard to come back home after giving up on her dream. That was surely what it was.

People grew weak when they had a way out. The existence of a place to go back to would naturally transform a fiery challenger's spirit into a weak flickering ember. And that went doubly so for traveling minstrels. The two fundamental supports that anyone could fall back on were their homeland and their family, but for a minstrel without a homeland, reliance on family could become all the more powerful.

Severing that bond was the greatest trial in the quest for true independence.

When Liliana was drinking muddy water, eating blades of grass, and feeling weak as she curled up in a burrow she had stolen from a wild animal and whimpered about wanting to go back home, she realized what her parents had been doing for her.

If her spirit had broken there, the current Liliana wouldn't have existed. She would have just put away her lyulyre, found herself an acceptable husband, gotten married, and maybe had a dozen kids or something.

—*And what a hell that would have been.*

"Ah."

And later in her travels, she happened to cross paths with her parents in the street of a town, which had been really awkward. All the more so because they were holding a little girl in their arms who Liliana didn't recognize. She had to assume it was probably her little sister, but she didn't stop walking. She just straightened her back, held her head high, and walked past her parents without hesitation or shame while tears poured from her eyes and her nose started running.

She didn't say a word to her parents and didn't introduce herself to her little sister. But that was fine. That was the life Liliana had chosen—the life of a traveling minstrel who set forth in the embrace of her songs.

And when the day came that she was famous the world over for her singing, her parents who were always quick to follow popular trends would surely start bragging about her. And the first victim would undoubtedly be that sister whose name she didn't know.

—And that's a grand enough dream to shoot for, isn't it?

"Ha-ha, that's a story to set a breast all aflutter. Not that I have much to be fluttering, though!"

And with that reaffirmed resolution, the maiden Liliana continued on her path at the ripe old age of seventeen.

3

Now twenty-two, Liliana had been on her own for nine years—naturally, the road she traveled had been filled with hardship, and it could hardly be said to be smooth sailing.

Particularly right after she had first set out, when she had almost died in the mountains just two days after she vowed to become the minstrel queen. She had been picked up by a merchant caravan that happened to be passing by, and if they had not hired her as a maid, she surely would have perished alone in the wilderness not long after.

They were traveling merchants who plied their trade across the lands, and she accompanied them for a time.

Fortunately, they were a well-trusted group of merchants and were welcomed in every town they visited. Taking advantage of that, Liliana began her career as a minstrel with a lyulyre in one hand. Those days were mainly spent singing by the side of the road to earn her daily keep. She still carried around the first gift she received after a performance as a charm.

After around a year of this, the band of merchants broke up, and turning down a marriage proposal, Liliana set out on her real solo journey this time.

She encouraged herself by declaring that her time in the shallow waters was now over, and the legend of Liliana Masquerade would begin anew.

Setting aside questions of when exactly it started the first time.

The years of suffering, hardship, searching for hidden treasure, and patronage from people in power can be charitably omitted.

Basically, a great many things happened. The world was a cold, lonely place for a singer all on her own without the support that came from being a part of a merchant band or a member of a famed family of minstrels.

The admonition her parents had given her when she left—that her dream was not an easy one—was something she understood deep in her bones by now. But a major turning point came for Liliana when she realized how the world really worked.

—The realization that the heroes and heroines in my songs, the people I thought were my friends when I was young, are actually just complete strangers and entirely unrelated to me.

There was no great revelation or moment of enlightenment. It was just something she sort of realized one night.

As she wavered on the verge of death, suffering from stomach pains and fever after getting sick from eating grass for sustenance during one of her struggling moments, it suddenly clicked.

The people I knew in those wonderful stories would never have ended up like that. Because their stories were already over.

The days they had spent coughing up blood, dreaming, shouting, and swinging their swords were long past, and Liliana was just a thief scraping the surface of their lives and then telling that story to other people.

Liliana loved them, but they couldn't love Liliana.

Her feelings were indefinite and worthless, entirely one-sided, and most importantly, they were looking backward at a dead end with no way out.

So what am I? What is a minstrel?

It was only after she had run away from her parents, while boasting she would become the minstrel queen, and after having lived as a minstrel for several years in her own way, that Liliana realized that she was a fraud.

That was her first real setback. The shock was comparable to having her nose and teeth utterly shattered.

“

On the fourth day, Liliana woke up feeling better. She washed her face in a small brook and drank from it.

The face she saw reflected in the water looked different, changed. She could hear the grass swaying in the wind, the brook babbling clearly, and the insects and birds chirping cheerfully.

—And when I just naturally heard that all as a song, I broke into tears.

Liliana sobbed, unable to stop the tears overflowing from her eyes and unable to contain herself as she leaped into the river.

The insects, birds, and fish were shocked, and the wildlife burst into song as Liliana's head broke through the surface. That day she laughed and cried and laughed and cried.

Descending the mountain and going into town, dirty from the mud and water, Liliana stepped out into the road to begin a performance.

Everyone avoided her, disgusted by the shabby-looking girl holding a lyulyre. The owner of the shop she had stopped in front of looked upset, and the people traveling along the road all looked annoyed as well.

If she had stood there for just a few seconds more, some heartless person would almost certainly have tossed her aside.

But she was quick to begin her dance. Not because there was any guarantee she wouldn't be kicked aside if she didn't start at once.

—I just wanted to start singing as soon as I could.

“

Their eyes were entirely focused on the shabby-looking girl who had stood up to dance. And basking in those gazes, Liliana imagined looking down at herself from a bird's-eye view, seeing herself become impassioned as she stood on the stage, pouring all of her being into the music.

She focused and focused and focused, and just as she reached the upper limits, she began to sing.

That was true music. Everything else she had sung before was something else entirely.

She rediscovered all the famed pieces she thought she once knew. That feeling broke through and spread.

The people she had thought of as irreplaceable friends who were always at her side left her behind, ascending into the sky beyond. And with a bright and clear heart, she sang, seeing them all off.

A song was a gift. She was nobody to her old friends from the songs that had been passed down through the generations.

And that was fine. Liliana understood that as a minstrel.

And having understood that, she would continue to sing.

She would travel to every corner and brag about them. About just how great a group of people had once lived and breathed in this world.

She would go around and talk about how she had for a time misunderstood and thought of those wonderful people as her friends. And someday, she would become close with truly amazing people, so that she could go around bragging about how amazing her actual friends were.

“

An intense, reckless emotion similar to those moments was swirling in her breast.

She wanted so desperately to sing. There were too many things she wanted to put into words and set to music. Even though she was in the middle of a performance, she wanted to keep going more than anything in the world. It was like a sickness.

The white flames that burned only what they elected to burn were still roaring unabated. The ruinous aspect of the fire didn't afflict Liliana, but the incandescent heat continued to torment her. It felt very much like the soles of her feet were being burned, and her body was still clamoring from the exertion of having run all the way up the burning tower. It was a terrible anguish that made her want to break down and cry out in agony.

But she couldn't do that. And rolling around in pain would just be a waste. There were people below her who would listen to her song, and her voice existed to sing, not to cry.

“

Liliana sang of how despite the struggle they faced, morning would come again.

Her fingers flew across the strings of her lyulyre as she sang and danced. She used every last bit of room on the top of the tower to make sure people could hear and see her.

But sadly, Liliana’s voice couldn’t reach all of them.

It was not a matter of raising her voice. Some of them were simply too far away. And the crowd below was restless, too. No matter how much she poured into her song, there was a physical and psychological wall that she couldn’t overcome.

Liliana believed in the power of music.

But sound could only become music once it actually reached someone’s ears.

How many people were there around the plaza, faltering under the weight of tremendous anxiety and grief? Hundreds? Thousands? Liliana had never entranced such a large number all by herself before.

The average person didn’t have the means or the tools to amplify their voice to reach countless people all at once.

Liliana’s attempt was reckless, and her wish was too far out of reach.

Was she being foiled by harsh reality again? Was she just being reckless like her parents had said when she was ten? Was it just history repeating itself?

The power of music was real, but was she still a fake?

Am I just going to let it end like this?

Just when that resentful thought was about to scorch her throat —

“Liliana—sweet diva. Prithee, captivate me with thy singing for all eternity.”

“

her distance from all of them. She refused to lend her voice to anyone who had ulterior motives that went beyond an earnest devotion to music. That was her pride and duty as a minstrel.

"I have been captivated by your beauty. Please stay by my side!"

But he was the first to try to get close to her out of base interest in her appearance.

He didn't find out that Liliana was a minstrel until after he had already tried his best to woo her. When it happened that she was singing before him, his focus was on her face and chest and legs more than on her singing, and honestly, in addition to it being unpleasant, she had even felt alarm bells go off in her head.

But it was not as if he was unmoved by her singing, either, even though he didn't attempt to hide that his feelings were for Liliana herself.

He both had strong feelings about Liliana's appearance while also understanding her singing, and upon learning more about her character, he had not recoiled or shunned her.

So—

"I want to have you to myself. But your voice must not be monopolized. The diva's voice for all and Liliana for me. Is that too much to ask for?"

When he suggested using the metia so that all Pristella could hear her singing, he had worn such a carefree smile.

It left her marveling at how innocent and unassuming his smile could be.

Unfortunately for him, though, if that was his idea of a pickup line, then he's out of luck because my greatest struggle was trying to not crack up on the spot.

Liliana knew all sorts of stories of love that had been passed down through the generations. She was an expert when it came to love.

She knew all about men and women who grew excited and lost themselves in the throes of passion. She was well versed in what words allured, what attitudes made hearts flutter, and how to make budding love bloom.

She was not so naive that she would fall for such a clumsy line.

I'm not that naive. I'm not. But I really did like the ring of the word diva. *Even if it is so wonderfully over-the-top that I can't quite bring myself to puff out my somewhat lacking bosom in pride.*

Because he—Kiritaka Muse—believed that Liliana could be a diva.

Because he made her this town's diva.

"My sweet diva, Liliana. Your singing can bring happiness to everyone!"

"

growing.

It was a divine manifestation of musical power supported by her true strength as a singer and her resolve to lay everything on the line in that moment.

Of course, Liliana was not aware of it herself.

And there was no one there who could wreck the mood of the moment and tell her the truth.

Liliana was just singing with all her heart and soul.

She was just putting everything into that one moment, pouring everything into her song as a true minstrel.

And the voice of Pristella's diva rang out in the night.

5

"—My eyes did not deceive me."

Holding a Sunlight Blade that glowed red as if a sun were embedded in it, Priscilla smiled beautifully.

The singing had reached Priscilla's ears as well.

With the control tower engulfed in white flames as her stage, Liliana's voice reached its zenith.

The fires created by Priscilla's Sunlight Blade burned only those she chose, but the heat of the fire was all too real, and the control tower was steaming hot, easily hot enough to cook meat on its now bright red stones.

Liliana's feet were at that very moment roasting from a heat so intense she had to be wishing she could just leap off the building. But there was no trace of the pain or any whimpering or bravado or excuses or any distortions at all in her full-throated singing.

She couldn't possibly be ignoring the heat, but her song surpassed any pain she was feeling. It was an idiotic thing, the pinnacle of stupidity that only a true fool could achieve. Proof that a fool with talent could bring about impossible results that overturned all logic.

"Her absurdity is most gratifying. A simpleton and a fool are similar but different things. Fools have no value at all, but simpletons can at least be amusing. And she has demonstrated a worth beyond mere amusement. As such, I shall reward her efforts."

As Priscilla talked to herself, by now familiar fiery chains howled above her head. The metallic snake shrouded in flames flailed madly around where she stood, seeking to tear through her flesh.

“A boor and disagreeable in the extreme,” Priscilla scoffed as she answered in kind with an attack of her own.

Her blade drew an elegant arc as it cut down the writhing metallic serpent with ease. There was a series of light sounds, but her beautiful form was unscathed. Suddenly—

“You and that girl are a serious bother! What is she doing?! What is she singing?! The means are different, but it’s the same essence! She’s just proving the possibility of people understanding each other through another means!”

Sirius shouted in a spittle-flecked rage at having her own power be disrupted.

Swinging her arms, the strength of her flames increasing with her rage until she was shrouded in a crimson inferno, Sirius glared hatefully at Liliana perched high up above.

Liliana’s blessing had awakened, and it was on par with Wrath’s Authority.

If Sirius fell under the influence of Liliana’s song, the effects would be channeled through her own power and spread to every person in the city whose heart had been dominated.

That was the true nature of Liliana’s music now.

The madness was fading from the eyes of the people lining the burning canals. Instead of absurd swells of intense emotions filling their eyes, there were only tears that welled in response to the depths of their own emotions.

The cultist couldn’t desecrate the meaning embodied by those heartfelt tears. That was the difference in ability between the diva and the monster.

“Why?! Why?! If it was him, if I could just reach him, I could prove it! Why must you stand in my way?! Even though people wish to join together with one and another! Even though they wish to become one! Even though that is how the world has continued, how it will continue! Why?!”

“There are a multitude of ways to interpret a single song. Even two people hearing the same masterpiece do not experience the same depth of meaning when they describe it as beautiful. For someone who clamors so much about emotion to have such a shallow understanding of something so crucial… There is no love so pathetic as one created by a fool like you.”

“No ooooooone asssssked yoooooou!”

Enduring Priscilla’s scornful gaze, Sirius gripped both of her shoulders. The next instant, she ripped off the bandages that were covering her body, releasing the golden chains wrapped around her torso and limbs.

Bits of flesh and blood oozed from every which place as Priscilla’s expression twisted in revulsion. The now fully unleashed chains bared their true fangs.

Enduring the terrible pain of her skin being peeled, flesh being shredded, and bones being ground away, Sirius turned that flowing blood into greater flames, igniting the chains that she swung ferociously, attacking with pure hellfire.

The two long snakes of flame connected to Sirius’s arms swelled with an intense blaze so bright that it banished all shadow.

“Unsightly in life and unsightly in combat. You would do well to remember that the life one lives shows in the face.”

Even when confronted with Sirius’s greatest display of power and hostility, Priscilla’s attitude didn’t change in the slightest.

“Quivering emotions, violent passions! That is fury! That is Wrath!”

Fueled by deep hatred and loathing, Sirius’s flames grew, filling the entire plaza in front of the tower with a tremendous blast of heat.

The inescapable heat consumed the plaza like a tsunami, crashing down toward Priscilla to turn her into cinders.

What could the likes of a mere human do in the face of unavoidable, unstoppable flames that would burn everything?

“My will is the will of the heavens, and my Sunlight Blade cannot help but make it a reality.”

Standing against the approaching wave of flames, Priscilla held her Sunlight Blade in a low stance. She stretched one leg back, dropping into a crouch as she faced off with the onrushing fire. It was the beautiful stance of a true swordswoman.

“Incinerate her!”

Sirius roared venomously at Priscilla on the other side of the wall of fire. Priscilla simply let it pass. All that reached her ears was Liliana’s singing.

“—Tear it to shreds.”

Her heart swelling with the singing that was coming from overhead, Priscilla swung her Sunlight Blade upward at the encroaching flames.

It was a single swing—even if it was a legendary magical blade that possessed power beyond human understanding, it could only burn itself out helplessly in the face of such a towering tsunami of flames.

Were it not the Sunlight Blade of Priscilla Bariel, that is.

Having swung her blade upward, Priscilla's crimson figure was untroubled. She should have been swallowed up by a wild inferno that would have incinerated every trace of her beautiful figure, but there was not even a single bead of sweat on her brow.

The very hellfire that should have consumed her suddenly disappeared from the plaza.

However—

"—!"

After defeating the wave of flames, her Sunlight Blade's radiance increased dramatically, but her expression also changed. Not even taking a moment to comment, she started running as if propelled forward by an explosion.

Her crimson gaze locked onto Sirius, who had turned her back on Priscilla and started running.

The monster's furious sprint distanced her from Priscilla in an instant. From the way she was running, it was clear that she had not even waited to see the result of the attack she had just unleashed. It was not a simple attempt at flight, though. From the moment she unleashed the attack, Sirius's aim was clearly not Priscilla—

"Stop that earsplitting song! I won't allow such selfish emotions to negate the Wrath I received from hiiiiim!"

Eyes bloodshot, Sirius was hurtling straight at the control tower where Liliana was singing. The white blaze enveloping it was a fire that allowed only Liliana free movement. Even if Sirius could control fire normally, the flames of Priscilla's Sunlight Blade were fundamentally different, and Sirius would surely be mercilessly burned if she leaped into the fire.

And knowing that, the monster running toward the tower was attempting to tear it all down—

"—What do you think you are doing with my property?!"

Stepping forward, Priscilla accelerated in the blink of an eye, outstripping the wind as she closed in on the monster's back. Swinging her blade overhead, she slashed down diagonally toward Sirius's slender form.

"—Ngh?!"

The moment just before the blade was about to tear into Sirius, a gold chain entwined itself around Priscilla's arm.

The chain appeared out of thin air, fixing her arm in place over her head. Priscilla's eyes widened in shock as Sirius spun around and raised her leg. The bandage that once covered the limb had been removed, and the chain binding her slender leg was bared.

"Rrrrrrrrraaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!"

With a hair-raising roar, the chain flew straight at Priscilla's face. Even Priscilla couldn't evade a well-executed surprise attack and was forced to take the hit directly.

The chain controlled by Sirius's leg slammed straight into Priscilla's face, flying several times faster and hitting several times harder than the ones Sirius controlled with her arms. A thunderous sound of flesh and steel meeting violently rang out, and the barrette that was holding Priscilla's orange hair went flying, letting it stream out freely.

"—You…"

Her crimson gaze pierced Sirius.

Priscilla had sustained no visible damage. Even after taking the sort of attack that should have permanently marked her beautiful face, there wasn't even the slightest of blemishes. But her pride had been terribly wounded.

Unable to fully dampen the force of it, she had stopped her advance, effectively allowing Sirius to press forward.

"Crumble and burn to ash, you frauuuuuud!!!"

In that moment, Sirius closed the distance with the control tower in a single lunge, drawing upon even more leg strength than she had used to hammer Priscilla and smash the base of the tower with her incomprehensibly powerful chain strike.

The giant serpent shrouded in flames crackled as it swung across the base of the tower. It slammed into the side of the stone tower with a thunderous crash, shattering the wall and sending the structure toppling into a gruesome sea of fire.

With Liliana still atop the tower, it began to collapse and fall apart.

"

crumbling tower.

However, Liliana was still singing. Even as the floor crumbled away and she was swallowed up by spreading destruction, Liliana continued to fulfill her role as a diva, still captivating the hearts of the people.

"—I approve of that resolution!"

Stepping forward, Priscilla charged straight at Sirius's back without hesitation.

If Liliana's song stopped, the people's hearts would fall again into Sirius's clutches. Making a split-second decision, Priscilla raised her glowing Sunlight Blade and took off, the stones on the ground exploding underneath her feet from the force alone.

Seeing that, Sirius's lips curled up as she hurled renewed scorn at Priscilla.

"Heartless egotist! Trying to justify your own inability to empathize, calling your deficiency superiority! Don't make me laugh! People wish for understanding and unity above all!"

"Uncultured fool!"

Having toppled the control tower, Sirius was berating Priscilla for prioritizing the enemy over saving Liliana.

Sirius leaped, swinging chains down at Priscilla with the force of stomping her leg. They crashed into the ground, followed by a delayed explosion of flame wherever they made contact, breaking Priscilla's posture in the fiery wind. She held her ground in the blast, enduring for a moment before advancing again.

Even as she got swept up in waves of intense heat, Priscilla's crimson eyes never wavered.

Sirius's wrath was the same. It had already passed the point where any other person's voice could reach her.

Both of their value systems were complete and internally sound. Because of that, they were also utterly incompatible.

There was a tremendous clamor from the leaning tower. Fragments of stone exploded out in the destruction as it belched black smoke and flames all around, transforming the plaza into an incandescent purgatory.

The people who had been at the foot of the tower fled with tears and cries as it began to fall. But the tears were not of sadness but of praise for the singing that refused to stop.

Seeing that, Priscilla—

"—To become one is love!"

“No—love is the tolerance to accept even what is different. The idea of everyone seeing things from the same perspective, thinking the same things, and feeling the same way all the time is utterly repulsive.”

There was a flash. The chains mercilessly closed in from four sides and were promptly cut down by Priscilla, who moved on instinct alone.

Her Sunlight Blade absorbed the wall of flames that erupted from the ground, knocking aside every last one of the rampaging chains. The next instant, Priscilla pushed forward as the sound of blade meeting chain was swallowed up by the cacophonous collapse of the control tower.

Cutting through that clamor, Priscilla’s momentum brought her directly next to Sirius.

“This is it.”

“—I wouldn’t be so sure!”

The moment the blade reached Sirius, the space in front of the Archbishop’s chest warped unnaturally.

Immediately after, what appeared on the other end of the distortion was a girl whose whole body was bound by Sirius’s gold chain. Sirius was holding a sweet little girl not much older than ten in front of her.

“Nnnnnnngh!”

Priscilla immediately discerned that this was the same Tina whom she had heard about before the beginning of the operation and realized that she had been held captive by Sirius this entire time.

“Your heart that pities this girl! That is the sprout of love that has taken root in your—”

“Overwrought.”

She realized it, but Priscilla was unmoved by her presence. Just as she had said before the operation began, Priscilla had nothing to spare for trivial problems.

Because of that, Priscilla didn’t hesitate in the slightest even with the flashy entrance of a hostage. Her sword didn’t falter at all, passing diagonally through both Tina’s and Sirius’s bodies. The red blade clad in such tremendous heat easily severed the chains binding Tina, and then a white flame erupted.

“—H-huh?”

“My Sunlight Blade burns only what I wish to burn and cuts only what I wish cut."

The chains split apart as the young girl regained her freedom. She fell to her knees on the spot, her tearstained face peering up, dumbstruck by the feeling of the sword that had gently caressed her body.

She had no dreadful wound to worry about.

Priscilla had nothing to spare for trivial problems. And so, she avoided the trivial problems by simply not cutting something she didn't wish to cut—meanwhile, behind the little girl, the filthy monster's blood sprayed.

Sirius looked down at her wound and then slowly shook her head as she gazed at Priscilla. And she cocked her head as if confused to see Priscilla standing across from her so leisurely.

"My pain…do you…?"

"Why would I feel your pain? Trouble me not with such trifling ideas like a union of hearts. You may die alone in the grips of your delusions."

Priscilla swung her blade again as the monster cocked her head.

There was a tremendous sound and force as Sirius's body bounced across the pavement, spattering blood everywhere as she went flying into the waterway before making a big splash and sinking beneath the surface.

Seeing the giant spray of water out of the corner of her eye, Priscilla looked at her Sunlight Blade.

The dazzling gleam of its blade grew clouded, and the light faded from the sword.

"…The sunlight fades… The sun is in shadow? Count yourself lucky that you've managed to escape, scum."

As Priscilla muttered to herself, the collapsing tower finally finished falling. Most of the stone tower had transformed into a mound of rubble, and there was no trace left of the upper parapet where Liliana had been standing.

The tower had partly collapsed into the canal, and the singing had stopped.

"…U-ummm…"

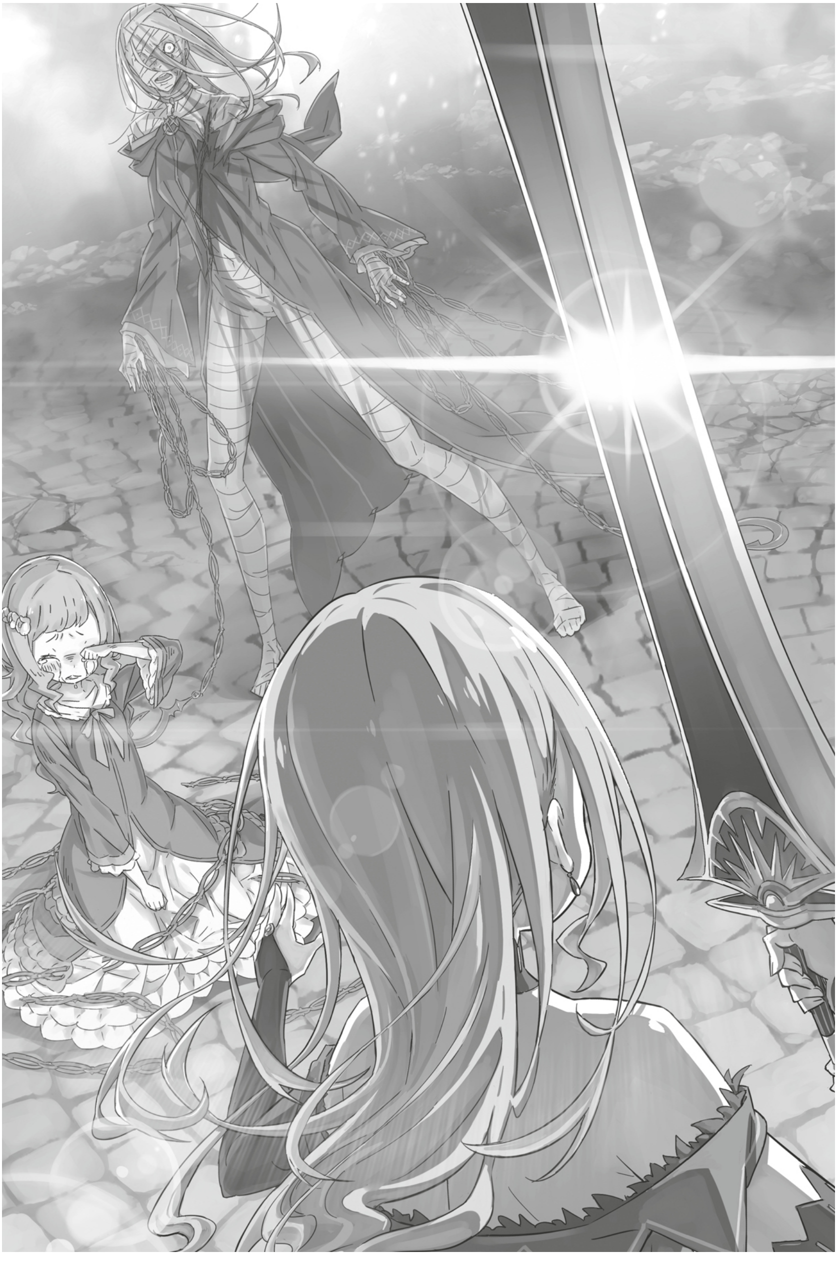
A youthful voice called out as Priscilla's eyes focused on the mountain of rubble.

It was Tina. She looked like she was still unable to believe she had regained her freedom, but she quivered and started bawling when Priscilla peered down at her imperiously.

Priscilla sighed slightly and returned her Sunlight Blade to its sheath in the sky.

As she did, the white flames burning the waterways immediately disappeared, and the great mass of people started approaching the scene. Many of them went to the mound of rubble, searching for the diva who had presumably been caught in the collapse.

“A noisy bunch for a noisy night. This is the time for a song, and yet… To fail to meet my expectations is nothing other than rank negligence—disappointing.”



She seemed disinterested, as always, but there was a wealth of emotion embedded within that boredom.

Priscilla turned away from the crying girl and looked out at the canal filled with the rubble of the tower.

“But that was not bad. I suppose I should praise your efforts.”

6

Floating, floating. Just going with the flow of water. Floating, floating.

My whole body feels heavy, and I’m totally empty. Is this what it’s like to be battered and bruised? I can’t lift a finger.

“Ahhhh, uhhhh.”

My throat is completely drained, too. I’m just a lump of bruised flesh now.

Falling into the water like this could’ve easily led to me drowning to death, but fortunately a minstrel’s clothes are so skimpy there’s hardly any fabric to absorb water, so I somehow end up floating like this.

Well, if I just keep drifting along, I’ll end up carried out into the world beyond by the Great Tigrasea River, so I shouldn’t stay in the water for too long, buuuut for now I shall just keep floating.

“Ayyyy, eeeee.”

Still, that tower was absolutely bursting with flames. I was being broiled alive up there, so when I first hit the water, it was a nice, refreshing feeling, but I’m starting to get to the point where I don’t even feel the cold, so, well, this is getting questionable.

If we’re talking about questionable, though, I sort of feel like the state of mind required to just keep singing away as the flaming tower fell out from under me was maybe worse! That was pretty godlike if I do say so myself, though!

So, well, worse comes to worst, even if I just sink under the surface like this, I’ll at least have won, right?

I’ve still got tons of ambitions to realize as a minstrel, but in a sense, I’m a woman among women who did what needed to be done when push came to shove.

Even if I didn’t fulfill my dream of singing a song that would be remembered for all time, my performance must have left some kind of impact on the people who heard it in the plaza, right? Even if it becomes just a story for the dinner table, if I left my mark, then that's fine.

"Ooooh, ooooh."

Incidentally, those odd sounds I've been making are supposed to be a cry for help. Basically, a sign that hey, I'm here. Yeah. I mean, to be honest, I'd rather not die after all!

Still, though, I'm about at my limit, and a lot of things have happened, so all in all, it was a pretty fun life.

So, as I start to slip under, thank you for everythi—

"—Liliana!"

"Eep?!"

That was a shock, just as I relaxed and started to slip under the surface, someone called my name. I can hear the sound of someone leaping into the water and feel them swimming close.

And a surprisingly solid set of fingers is grabbing my cute and slender shoulder—

"Is that by any chance Kiritaka?!"

"I'm glad I could meet you again, Liliana! You were adorable and beautiful floating on the surface, but it can't be good for your health to cool your throat and body too much after such a major performance, can it?"

"Wh-what a pretentious…ummm, uh, but, uhhh…"

It was Kiritaka of all people who pulled me close and rejoiced at seeing me again with such a dramatic reaction.

His hair that was always so neat and tidy is drenched, and rather unusual for him, he had taken off his shirt before diving into the water. And that smile he flashed after saving me from the verge of drowning.

It's all a little too good to be true and just a little bit awkward.

"K-Kiritaka? Ummm, the Archbishop said you were out there in the crowd, but…"

"Ugh! I—I can't really excuse myself for that. It is true that I was caught in that deranged gathering and went wild along with everyone in the crowd…"

"Ha-ha-ha—well, well, well. That's a bit shameful, isn't it…?"

It's an odd thing, but I couldn't really hide the nuanced feeling I had at finding out that it really hadn't been a lie that Sirius had held Kiritaka as insurance and that she had unleashed him in the crowd. It seemed like that boast about not telling lies had been real, but I wouldn't say, for the record, that the sum total of her flaws was not the sort of thing that could be made up for by a single virtue!

Honestly, I never want to deal with her again!

"B-but—but you were in such a terrible situation, so why are you here…?"

"—It's because of your singing voice, Liliana. My adorable diva."

"Uhyaaa!"

I couldn't help a weird squeak at such a blunt, straightforward response. Kiritaka smiled as he looked down at me, his hair all messed up from the water.

"Everyone who was consumed by the Archbishop's malice has returned to their senses by virtue of your singing. I was simply the first to rush to your side… I wonder if that could be considered proof of my love for you?"

"So brazen."

That answer was just what I'd expect from Kiritaka, and I could feel myself losing energy. I was already starting to doze off and could feel my consciousness starting to get fuzzy.

"Liliana? Liliana! Are you okay, Liliana?!"

"If you are asking if I'm fine or not, then I'm not fine at all. I'm really, really sleepy, so I'm going to take a little nap. I've hit my limit…"

It sounded sort of like someone on the verge of dying, but I don't feel like I'm going to die, so it's probably okay.

It's just, I was relieved. Though feeling safe inside Kiritaka's arms is a little, well…

"I won't die, so I'll leave the rest to you…"

"Ah yes, understood! I'll carry you to someplace safe, so you needn't worry, Liliana!"

"If you can keep your hands to yourself while I'm asleep, then let's talk a bit more…"

"Ehhh?!"

He wouldn't even think of it, of course, but just to be sure. I am a maiden after all.

Since I might just end up saying something really embarrassing when I do wake up.

—Like how I'm glad to be your diva.

CHAPTER 5

BELIEVING

1

A pillar of ice stretched up into the sky, freezing the entire chapel.

The air crackled, as if the night sky itself was dying. Just how much terrible resolve did that pillar of ice contain within?

Only the architect of such a painful scene could possibly know.

"…Emilia…"

An absolute wall of ice swirling with a tremendous amount of mana. It couldn't have been created by anyone other than Emilia.

In order to stop Lion Heart, Regulus's kingdom had to be destroyed.

In order to do that, the residents had to be set free, and Subaru had hoped that Regulus's wives would know how to do just that.

And if that came up empty, if they didn't know how to escape, either—then I realized this would probably be the only option. But even if I realized it, I wouldn't be able to actually do it.

Subaru had been sure that Emilia wouldn't even be able to think of the last resort, but seeing what happened, he realized he had been wrong.

Emilia had made the decision. This was her answer.

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait… This is… Did…?"

Regulus's face stiffened as he stared in shock at the spire of ice that had shot out of the chapel.

There was no way for outsiders to know what conversation had passed in the chapel, but even as oblivious as Regulus was, the meaning of that scene should have come through loud and clear.

He should have realized at the very least that his wives had passed from his kingdom—

"You! Is this what you wanted to do?! Can you even call yourself human?! To so selfishly steal away that which another man loves without restraint?! How…how hideously cruel must you be to do something so awful—gh?!"

Regulus stamped the ground as he ran his hand through his hair and shouted in abject fury. That small gesture caused the road beneath him to explode, and the ground shifted so much, it almost felt like the city itself was leaning. In fact, several of the surrounding buildings tilted as well, and he ripped a massive hole in a wall that he punched to vent.

But he was no calmer when he glared back at Subaru.

"Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied now?! Overjoyed at robbing my innocent wives of their lives all for the sake of killing me. What humanity—gaaah!"

As Regulus cursed Subaru, airing his grief at having his partners stolen from him, his body suddenly went flying.

The reason was a lance of ice unleashed by the girl who emerged from the frozen chapel on the other side of the road.

More missiles of ice slammed into Regulus's body, one after the other, with deadly force, mercilessly sending his slender frame up into the air, where another pillar of ice slammed down into his body.

It was unrelenting, sending Regulus hurtling down into a nearby canal. The moment he hit the water, it froze over with a violent *crack*, encasing him in ice.

"—Consider that the divorce papers from your wives."

Freezing over the city road covered in water, Emilia's silver hair billowed behind her as she returned to the fray. Her violet eyes were filled with a cold animosity and a powerful resolve as she slowly walked over.

Subaru rushed to her side.

"Emilia!"

"Subaru, is that wound going to be okay?"

"I'm fine! The cut is just a little bit deep, but it looks worse than it really is. More importantly, the wives in the chapel…"

"—They all wanted to punish Regulus. So…"

Emilia looked down, turning her thoughts to the frozen chapel behind her.

That reaction alone was more than enough to grasp the weight of what Emilia had taken upon herself. However, Subaru had no intention of making her bear it alone.

"I'm sorry for making you shoulder something so terrible. But now his Lion Heart is…"

"No. It doesn't look like it will be that simple."

"Huh?"

She had made the difficult choice. They should have reached the answer for defeating Regulus. That was the whole reason Emilia had given her all for the sake of winning this battle.

He was stunned by her furrowed brow when behind him the ice sculpture in the frozen canal cracked.

The fault lines in the ice spread even to the wall holding back the water. Leaks had sprung in the broken canal, flooding the surrounding city streets, and even reaching Subaru's and Emilia's feet.

Then an arm burst out from inside the ice sculpture.

"Truly, you are the most laughably disrespectful, irredeemably vulgar, stunningly incompetent, unbelievably shameless, and irrevocably low-class…!"

Shattering the ice prison with an unnecessary flair, the villain stepped out, still dry despite being fully submerged in water.

There was not a single stain on his white suit, his white hair was totally unruffled, and his pale face was not only unscathed but there was not even a bead of sweat on his brow. It was like a waking dream—or rather a waking nightmare.

After that concentrated barrage, seeing him totally unharmed could only mean that his Lion Heart was still in effect.

"So now what? How are you planning to take responsibility for what you've done? After acting so high-and-mighty and skulking about doing so many things in the shadows, it all ended in a massive and utterly misguided failure, leaving nothing but the enormity of the sacrifices you have exacted. Is this some sort of joke to you? I wonder how you intend to make things right?!"

Subaru took stock of the situation that was seemingly unchanged as Regulus raged. Was it really misguided, and were they really meaningless sacrifices?

"There's no way! Not with how much you blabbed about the effects of your Lion Heart… There's no way you have the brains or the balls to bluff like that!"

Subaru unintentionally defaulted to provocation, but Regulus had regained his usual composure and that all-too-familiar sneer.

"Do you think I'm good-natured enough to let such unpardonable slander pass without comment? I should tell you, not infringing on people's hearts is the absolute minimum courtesy that should not need to be taught! No one has any right to look down on anyone else, so how can you so comfortably display your feeble-mindedness to the world? Are you utterly brainless in addition to being contemptibly heartless?" Regulus tapped his white head mockingly. "Maybe that wanton girl just miscounted? Not even able to count the lives you've stolen puts you in the realm of a true mass murderer. What is wrong with you?"

"You…! How can you even say something like that…?"

"Don't try to deflect. Whatever I have or have not done up to now has no bearing on what that woman did. Don't try to escape the blame for the sins you've committed. Don't avert your eyes from your crime. Trying to blame me for the things you've committed? You must feel no remorse and have no interest in atonement. Are you not ashamed of yourself?"

He berated them with projected outrage and an irrational theory. But the only reason someone like Regulus Corneas could exist at all was because he didn't feel the slightest doubt about how he lived his life.

How many contradictions did he have to stuff into a single line before he would be satisfied?

Talking with Regulus wore at the nerves. It was enough that Subaru could sense the danger creeping in closer. He couldn't help but wonder if trying to stay sane while challenging the Archbishops was a foolish idea from the very start.

"Either way…crap, I must've miscalculated something."

Lion Heart and Little King were connected, and the foundation of that connection definitely rested with the wives in the chapel.

That much had to be true given what Regulus had said and done thus far. Over the course of the life-and-death escape during the past dozen or so minutes, Subaru had gleaned the depths of Regulus's intelligence and vocabulary.

Regulus didn't have the mindset to trick others or the skill to pull the wool over someone's eyes with smooth talking.

He was utterly lacking in empathy and couldn't put himself in anyone else's shoes. He was the only one who mattered in his world, and the limits of his understanding only extended as far as his own skin and no further. The marriages were shams, he only espoused the shallowest of principles, he was a complete amateur at fighting, and he was pure evil in nature.

In other words, he was an Archbishop.

"Fifty-three people…"

As the gears spun in Subaru's head, Emilia suddenly murmured.

Emilia had been almost painfully quiet since returning from the chapel. It was only natural considering what had occurred there, but after letting Regulus's nonsensical censure pass without comment, she finally opened her mouth, and that was all she said.

However, Regulus was easily provoked, and he cocked his head when he heard that.

"What? What was that? Not an 'I'm sorry'? Not a tearful apology and begging for forgiveness?"

"It was fifty-three people. That was the number of women you were imprisoning. I would never mistake that number. I would never miscount the number of lives."

"Hmph. So? What, then? What were you expecting me to say? Did you want praise for being able to count?"

Regulus replied with a scornful sneer. There was a loathsome pettiness to it that even the master of provocations, Subaru, had to acknowledge was impressive.

However, ignoring all that, Emilia turned toward Subaru.

"It's okay, Subaru. I've figured it all out."

"You did…?"

"And I'm *really* angry… I won't ever forgive him."

Subaru saw it as he recoiled. Emilia's voice dropped low as all emotion drained from her soft expression. Her face seemed like it had frozen over; she was the maddest he had ever seen her. There was a cold flame in her frozen eyes as she put her hand to her breast.

"Regulus's heart is here—it's in my chest now."

2

"Hnk."

Regulus put his hand to his mouth, unable to endure it any longer as he let out a cruel laugh. The muffled snort grew and grew into full-throated laughter.

Judging by his oversize reaction, Subaru knew instinctively that Emilia's guess had to be correct.

"What's so funny, you asshole?!"

"Isn't it obvious?! Because you are now well and truly at a dead end. What else is there to do but laugh after watching you reach the end of your rope? You understand what this means, right? You should recognize this means the noose is tightening around your necks!"

"Gh…"

Subaru was at a loss when Regulus said something that actually made sense for once.

In that moment, he didn't have the composure to reflexively argue with the Archbishop. Just like with the brides before, as long as Lion Heart had a place to run away to, he was invincible.

And this time, his heart was in the absolutely worst possible place.

"Emilia-tan, is it really…?"

"Mm-hmm. I had the spirits all check, and I can feel it, too. Something that isn't me inside of me. It makes me sick."

Emilia rubbed her stomach, confirming their terrible predicament.

In order to neutralize the effects of Lion Heart, they had to do something about the people who were members of his little kingdom. In other words, this time…

"But how can I?! And why Emilia's heart…?! Was I wrong about how Little King worked? Can he just put his heart in whoever he wants?"

—No, if it was that convenient a power, it would be equivalent to not having any limit at all.

It had to be that he couldn't shift his heart to anyone who was not a member of his kingdom. If it didn't even have that limitation, then the entire battle would have been a waste of time from the start.

Going at it from that direction, then—that would mean he had inducted Emilia into his kingdom—

"You're shameless."

"The words of an unfaithful woman are nothing more than the griping of a sore loser. Ah, of course as the defeated, griping is your right. And listening to those complaints with a feeling of superiority is my right as the victor… Ha-ha, not bad. Not bad at all!"

Subaru agreed wholeheartedly with Emilia, who was glaring scornfully at Regulus as he cackled.

It was a simple story. An easy-to-understand and sleazy thought.

For all that Regulus had derided Emilia, he still considered her one of his wives, making her a citizen in his little kingdom and an escape valve for his heart, just in case something happened.

What made it even more disgusting was how he was able to do it without anything that could even remotely be interpreted as consent from Emilia.

“Even though you were so insistent about me being unfit to be your wife.”

“How tiresome. Do not think yourself worthy to lecture me, you lecherous wench. More importantly, how are you planning to take responsibility for all my wives you murdered in cold blood? They were my ideal wives. How much time do you think I spent gathering all of them? Not a single wife or lover of an appropriate age to be seen. Are you going to leave me a worthless widower? You have a responsibility to fill the gap until I find a fitting new wife!”

Emilia directed a visceral hatred at the man the likes of which she had rarely displayed, but Regulus batted her furious words away with hopelessly warped logic.

He was happy to believe any twisted line of argument that affirmed his right to take up residence in Emilia’s heart. But if that was how it worked in practice, then that meant it was possible that Lion Heart could also reside in someone besides Emilia—

“Want to test it? It’s simple enough to find out if my heart can go anywhere else, right?”

“You…”

“Just kill the girl right here and now. If you snuff out her life, you will naturally learn my limits. It’s simple and logical…other than the fact that it’s impossible for you! Ha-ha-ha! Can you do it? Of course not. Because if you did that, then you would lose that which drove you to so selfishly challenge me in the first place!”

It was bitterly frustrating, but Regulus’s boastful pronouncement was absolutely right. Subaru couldn’t willingly choose to sacrifice Emilia. He could convince himself that sacrificing all of Regulus’s wives was necessary, but he couldn’t do the same for Emilia. Even if it was selfish, that was just the truth.

Subaru Natsuki didn’t value all lives equally. There was an order of precedence, and those closest to him were more precious.

Because Subaru's decisions were always self-centered.

"There, look at that. He can't do it. So why don't you try doing it yourself? It's simple. Just do the same thing you did to my wives. Or what? You can't do it? You can selfishly steal away other people's lives, but your own is too precious to lay down for the cause? The hypocrisy is so ripe. It almost makes me sick."

"—Subaru."

"Wait! Don't do it. You absolutely can't."

He immediately reacted when Emilia seemed like she steeled herself in response to Regulus's provocation. When she said nothing but his name, her voice was filled with unshakable resolve, and that frightened him.

Of course it wasn't just because she was rising to provocation or giving in to desperation. But Emilia had the resolve to make the ultimate sacrifice in the worst-case scenario if no other solution presented itself.

And Subaru had nothing if not the determination to keep her from making that choice—which left them with only defeat. Without some other plan, there was no changing the fact that Regulus was in total control of the situation.

"If you two are done here, then do you mind if I finally bring these proceedings to an end? Carrying around a filthy woman like you isn't really my thing, but I can compromise for the time being. You can fill in until I find my next wife. I will be killing him, though. After infringing on my rights this much… Ah, that's right—that's right. It's funny, isn't it?"

As Subaru gritted his teeth, Regulus's lips curled in the utmost pleasure.

"You're the one who made that noisy broadcast before the ceremony, right? What was it you said? That you defeated an Archbishop before? That was a good laugh. How pitiful, thinking that just because you killed that good-for-nothing meant you could somehow defeat me. He was a worthless dullard before he was an Archbishop, and he never achieved anything of note after becoming one, either."

Regulus scoffed, making a fool of Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti, who was the most detestable and bitter enemy Subaru had.

There was no excusing Petelgeuse. He was the lowest of the low. Subaru couldn't feel even the slightest bit of goodwill toward that evil spirit. He hated him to the bone and thought he was a monster who deserved to die.

But he felt a deep and visceral displeasure at hearing Regulus mock and ridicule him like that.

The world was a better place if the Archbishops didn't get along, but seeing Regulus's open hatred for someone in the same cult as him revealed just how horribly twisted his bloated sense of self-worth was.

To begin with, Petelgeuse was—

"—Ah."

Subaru looked up when that loathsome man crossed his mind, when he heard that blood-drenched evil laugh echo in the back of his head. And he gulped as he clutched his own chest.

Wait, is something like that possible?

"Can I…do that…?"

The only answer he had was a firm *I don't know*.

There was no evidence at all to support the theory that had just crossed Subaru's mind. It was nothing more than an armchair hypothesis—no, it was worse than that. It was just a wild idea. A thought experiment.

But even so, the only one who could test it out was Subaru.

It was just an idea backed by a hunch with astronomically bad odds. God only knew if it would work.

But even so—

"Emilia."

"

chapel, there was a gentle smile on her face.

“I always believed you would be able to do something.”

Argh, how unfair.

Having that much faith placed in him by the girl he loved, there was no way he could afford to screw up now. He had no choice but to make it work, no matter how desperate and frantic he needed to become.

“

in his heart so dark it didn't feel like his own, summoning again the memories of pain and terror as he set it free.

For just that one time, he decided to revert to the old name.

Just this once, so that villain with zero sense of comradery would understand. So he would know that this power was something he had inherited from his hated enemy.

"Come forth, Unseen Hands!"

3

Unseen Hands, also known as Invisible Providence.

Those were names for the power that resided inside Subaru, the power of the Witch that manifested because of the Witch Factor.

According to what he heard from the Witch Echidna inside the tomb in the Sanctuary, he had inherited his Witch Factor by killing Petelgeuse. And truth be told, he couldn't tell what sort of downsides might have been caused by absorbing it. But there was no mistaking that Subaru inheriting those Invisible Hands had been due to the Witch Factor.

Honestly, Subaru would rather not imagine the possibility that Petelgeuse was still somehow living inside of him. He hated Petelgeuse. Despised him. Believed the world was better off with him dead.

And yet… What is this feeling welling up in my chest?

Stirring, swirling, a voice without sound cheered as the black hands poured out from him.

It was an incomprehensible mixture of emotions blending cheer at being awakened, joy at gaining power again, and a deep desire to be wanted, to be called to service again.

It couldn't be explained away as just Subaru's own emotions. It was as if the Witch Factor itself were rejoicing.

The swell of emotion and euphoria at being set free and an unending storm of gratitude—

"Haaah?!"

Regulus's expression stiffened in shock when he heard Subaru's shout. He frantically looked around, searching for the Unseen Hands.

But there was no way he could see them. They were invisible after all.

The inferior version to the invisible and lethal ability of the man Regulus had scorned and belittled just moments ago.

There was only a single hand, and it had hardly any range. Moreover, its capabilities were entirely unexplored and unknown. It was laughably inadequate for breaking out of this deadlock.

“

and that had pushed Subaru to try this extreme gambit. All that was left was the courage to put the last bit of strength needed into those dark fingers.

“

"Ohhhhhhhh! Howl my third handdddd!!!"

The suspicions he harbored toward the shady power inside him were cleared.

It didn't matter anymore what the source of the power was. In that moment, it was inside Subaru, and he wanted desperately to save Emilia, so if it could do that…

The shadow-stitched fingers closed inside Emilia's chest.

Emilia moaned softly at the feeling of the fingers passing gently through the surface of her heart. Her expression looked more like she was being tickled than in pain.

Her cheeks and neck reddened as the clenched fingers of the hand grabbed onto something. Onto the pulse that was separate from the one maintaining Emilia's life. Onto an all-too-small lion's heart—

"Gotcha."

He didn't have the composure to gently pull it out.

Subaru's magic hand clenched tightly around the heart beating so boldly inside of Emilia.

Without hurting Emilia's heart at all, he crushed the parasitic organ of the fraud who dared speak of love.

All it took was one squeeze of his invisible, nonexistent hand.

"Bghah!"

But he had to pay the price for a level of concentration he had never before managed and for using a power that was not originally his own. Subaru was assailed by a pain that felt like his internal organs were being twisted tight, and a crushing sense of emptiness welled up inside him as he dropped to his knee. He was hacking uncontrollably, the metallic taste of blood mixing with saliva.

"Subaru!"

Emilia reached out to Subaru as he knelt in the flooded street, a bit of blood trailing out of the corner of his mouth. Taking her pale-white hand, Subaru put it to his forehead.

"Ah…"

"You're alive, right?"

"…Mm-hmm. I'm fine. My heart is still working just fine."

As he confirmed that blood was still carrying warmth throughout her body, Emilia checked her own pulse with her free hand. It was a heartbeat filled with a sense of relief.

And Regulus watched the two of them with a look of utter confusion.

"…Huh? What? What is it? Just ignoring everyone around you while retreating into your own little world? Explain the point of that stupid farce just now!"

Glaring at the two of them so close together, Regulus's eyes gleamed in rage.

Looking over at him, Subaru let out a little sigh.

"…Have you not noticed yet?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? Are you expecting people to just understand and notice things without you having to say anything? That's an act of aggression trying to control other people's thoughts…"

"Your feet are wet."

"Huh?"

Regulus was on the verge of exploding in renewed irritation when Subaru pointed to his feet. He was visibly indignant as his gaze followed Subaru's finger, but when he saw his shoes, there was a puzzled look on his face.

The white shoes matching his white suit were getting soaked from the pool of water he was standing in and had gotten fairly dirty already.

Regulus's eyes widened as he finally realized what that meant.

"You…gah?!"

Finally realizing the situation, Regulus swung his arm upward in a fit of anger. But before he could do anything, a long, pale leg elegantly extended, kicking him right in the face.

Unable to raise any kind of defense, Regulus slammed painfully into the wet ground with a groan. His suit was splattered with mud, and there was a mark on his face where the shoe had landed.

"Gah, bgh…? Th-that's…"

Regulus put his hand to his face in shock, as if he couldn't believe what had happened. Peering down at him after landing that splendid kick, Emilia clenched her fists.

"We did it—we can finally hit him!"

"Y-y-y-youuuuuu!"

Hearing Emilia's brief shout, Regulus's face turned crimson as he erupted in fresh anger.

He scooped up a handful of water as he stood up, aiming to hit Emilia with a shotgun blast of water droplets. But he was still off balance from the impact of the kick, and the splash he unleashed flew wide.

And because his torso was now unguarded—

“Icebrand Arts!”

“Gbghhhh!”

An ice war hammer formed in the palm of Emilia’s hand, and she let loose with a smash that almost looked like a golf swing. It struck home, driving into Regulus.

That hit contained enough force to crush organs and easily sent the villain flying backward into a nearby wall. Instead of passing through the wall, his back took the full brunt of the impact, and Regulus collapsed while coughing terribly, unable to catch his breath.

Hacking up blood and vomit, Regulus glared at the two of them with a face like wrath incarnate.

“Why?! Why—why—why—why—why?! You! How did the likes of you do this?! What did you do to Greed’s Authority?! To my rights?!”

“If you can’t figure it out after having seen all that, then it would be a waste of time bothering to explain it. But fine, it’s simple enough.”

Enjoying the pathetic show as Regulus ranted and raved, Subaru sneered as he hid his own pain. It was a grin no less evil than Petelgeuse’s.

“After never taking shit seriously and coasting through life on easy mode, you got your just deserts.”

“—!”

Even if he didn’t understand all the words, the fact that Subaru was belittling him came through loud and clear.

Regulus loosed a guttural growl, ignoring Emilia in order to take aim at Subaru. But Emilia was not going to just sit back and watch that happen.

“First is all the wives’ shares—I’ll be sure to get every last one.”

“Don’t screw with—mgh!”

Emilia took a step forward, unleashing a rising kick that hit Regulus right in the chin, sending him into the air. And once he was suspended, she hit him in the torso with an open palm thrust, slamming Regulus violently into the wall again by smashing the same spot where the ice hammer had mashed his internal organs. And once he slammed into the wall, Emilia unleashed a beautiful series of punches all over his body.

“Uyayayayaya! Urya!!!”

Despite the cute shouts, each of Emilia’s punches was powerful enough to shatter bone. Not even offering minor resistance, Regulus’s face was covered in blood in an instant. Pinned against the wall, he couldn’t fall down and was stuck being a punching bag.

His face, solar plexus, sides, his neck—Emilia mercilessly crushed every part of the human body that could be considered a vital point. It was a furious storm of attacks that was like nothing she had done before, and after landing one final straight punch—

“That’s the last! Fifty-three!!!”

Taking the last punch in the chest—ironically right where his own heart was—the wall behind Regulus collapsed from the sustained force of the barrage, and his body slumped to the ground with a painful groan.

If Subaru had been caught in such a crazy storm of attacks, he would probably have died at least three times.

And just when it seemed like Emilia might have been satisfied after all that—

“That takes care of their share. Now to finish this right.”

Emilia leaped backward, holding her hands out as countless icicles filled the night sky, surrounding the building Regulus had fallen into. After that nonlethal pummeling, destruction came in a concentrated barrage of much more lethal icicles. Regulus angered the wrong person.

His mistake and his sin were enraging Emilia, who was normally kind to a fault.

“

clear whether he was still conscious before the fusillade began.

But—

"…You really…went wild…"

A white shadow slowly emerged from the white mist that settled after the storm of ice was over.

His suit stained with blood, Regulus stood there while rubbing his misshapen face. He was breathing raggedly and bleeding from the forehead, but he had not been frozen or skewered by ice.

Almost as if he had regained the effect of his Lion Heart for just a second.

"Wheeze, haaah, ahhh…"

"—! So that's how it is."

Seeing Regulus grabbing his chest as he struggled to breathe, Subaru realized what was going on. He could invoke the effect of his Lion Heart while his heart was inside him. Of course…

"If you stop your own time in order to be invincible, that means stopping your heart while it's inside you, too. It's invincibility with a time limit, isn't it?"

"Grrrrrrrrr!"

Apparently right on the mark, Regulus's face twisted in raw fury as he endured the pain in his chest. If there was a time limit, then Emilia could keep up the attack with sheer volume, and eventually her attacks would get through.

At this point, Regulus was just a standard mob enemy who also happened to boast the greatest attack power in the world.

"Y-you know…! Do you not think this is a little unfair?!"

"Huh?"

While Subaru was trying to analyze their respective combat strength, Regulus suddenly pointed at him and then at Emilia, glaring at the two of them.

"Are you proud of yourself, two people ganging up to harass one lone person? Do you not feel any shame at all? The natural hesitation or doubt any reasonable person might feel doing that?!"

"You're really amazing."

With the exact same mouth he had used to say everything during the fight when he was standing on top of everything, thanks to the effects of his Lion Heart, he was earnestly appealing to their sense of propriety the moment he was at a disadvantage.

The brazenness of it blew right past disbelief for Subaru, earning him a sort of stunned respect. There was no way he would ever meet someone so utterly devoid of any redeemable features again in his lifetime.

"So you're one of those? Only a coward fights two on one, so let's fight fair and square and all? You think that's how a duel is supposed to be?"

"That's right! It's the natural thing to do and only reasonable, right? Who…who do you think I am?! I am Regulus Corneas, the Witch Cult's Archbishop of Greed! The most content…most immovable being in this world…!"

His voice was quivering as Regulus looked at his hands, as if clinging to something inside of them. Subaru just wanted to look away in secondhand embarrassment.

And having no words left for Regulus, Emilia responded in his stead.

"Everything you say constantly changes, and every word out of your mouth is empty and meaningless. I think you are the most pathetic person in the world."

"—Ngh! Enough! You'll regret making a fool out of me!"

Even his reaction to being scorned was pathetically shallow, and all he could do was keep repeating the same old tired lines.

Watching that helpless flailing, Subaru sighed. Regulus really didn't have any idea of how to win other than by starting in an overwhelmingly superior position.

If he could still use his Lion Heart for short periods, then it should be possible to come up with a few different ways to win, even if the odds were incredibly poor. But once the situation got even the least bit difficult, Regulus gave up without even exploring the edges of the board.

"Spend your whole life skating by without trying, and you end up stumbling in the most unexpected ways."

Being reminded of his own life somewhat when he looked at Regulus, Subaru peered up in the sky.

"Hey, Regulus. You wanted a nice and fair one-on-one, right?"

"—! Yes, of course. There's no way a knight like you would just hide behind your lady's skirt and cheer her on, right?"

Taking the initiative the moment it was convenient for him, Regulus resorted to his artless negotiation skills to try to secure a superior position for himself once again.

Between Subaru and Emilia, whose fighting strength was higher? It was not even a question worth asking. And if he killed

Subaru first, he might be able to create a momentary opening while Emilia was preoccupied by his death.

Putting what little brains he had to work was at least better than nothing. But he had no chance of beating Subaru with how weak his resolve was.

Finding a winning line out of what should have been checkmate was the very foundation of Subaru Natsuki's battles.

In that sense, Regulus had lost from the moment he chose to go after Subaru.

"I suppose it's only natural for a knight to fight after all."

"Of course. So—"

"So sorry to do this to you again, but I'll leave the finale to you."

Subaru responded not to Regulus, nor to Emilia, but while looking up.

Regulus's eyes widened. The next instant, a fiery red knight descended from the heavens.

"Understood—as a knight, allow me to accept this challenge."

"

Lugunica Kingdom Royal Guard, and knight to Lady Felt.”

Reinhard straightened up, putting his hand on the sword at his waist as he formally introduced himself. He stood at the ready, requesting an upright and honorable fight.

It was the universal form of a duel. The etiquette that even the bowel hunter Elsa had observed—

Regulus, however, held out both his hands and cried out.

“W-wait! Wait! This is—! This is crazy, right?!”

The Sword Saint had no mercy for one who rejected the warrior way and defiled the sacred etiquette of a duel.

Ignoring the villain’s whimpered shouts as he tried to talk his way out in the most unsightly way, the glimmering flame disappeared in the blink of an eye. And the next instant, he unleashed a single slash of his sword.

The blinding strike landed in Regulus’s crotch before continuing upward in a single flowing motion—sending Regulus flying into the sky far above without even the chance to cry out.

Regulus was sent high enough to be able to see the entire city that he had so badly devastated in his destructive rampage.

His cry, not quite a shriek and not quite a curse, echoed across the night sky over the city.

CHAPTER 6

REGULUS CORNEAS

1

Impossible, impossible, impossible. What's happening. It doesn't make any sense. Why am I being persecuted like this? Who do they think I am? I'm the Witch Cult's Archbishop of Greed, Regulus Corneas. The most fulfilled! The most complete individual! A being unwavering in body and spirit! So why must I suffer like this?! This isn't some joke, you bastards. How the hell do all of you just accept this insanity as if it's completely normal? What's going on? All three of you. I show just a little bit of mercy and you start getting ahead of yourselves. There should be a limit to misjudging your own strength. If I had just been serious from the start, you would have been annihilated in the blink of an eye. This is why I hate dealing with other people! How can they not be ashamed of themselves for such a ridiculous misunderstanding?! Bothersome, annoying, provocative, disagreeable, despicable, detestable, disgusting, loathsome dullards, the lot of them. I've gotten along just fine all these many, many years. Unlike those other fools, I've carried out my role as an Archbishop for over a century now. My father who drowned himself in alcohol despite never earning a proper income, my mother whose only talent was griping day in and day out, and my vulgar brothers who were always after what was mine—when I was first chosen by the Witch Factor and gained my powers, I killed them all, and then I killed everyone else in the village who had ever looked at me with contempt, and then I killed everyone in the town who had forced me to live in such a pathetic home in such a worthless village, and then I destroyed the country whose incompetent stewardship had left towns and villages like that unaddressed, and once they were all gone, I was finally able to discover a way of life befitting one such as me! I do not need anything. Everything else is just an annoyance. I am content. It is not that I am lacking anything. I do not *need* anything. I don't need anything from you pushy scum. And yet you insist on forcing things upon me, as if I were some poor, pitiful creature who looked lacking, somehow incomplete. If I could live in a world devoid of all those fools trying to foist useless things upon me, in a world where everyone was just *silent*, that would be enough for me. Each and every one of those useless louts, always running their mouths about whatever they want. Who gave you walking piles of garbage the right to pity me? You think I'm content to just let you do that? I don't need and never asked for anything. Curse my father who could never earn a proper living and drowned himself in booze but every once in a while bought me a present. Curse my mother whose only talent was grumbling about things day in and day out and who had the nerve to apologize for troubling me every day as if that somehow made it acceptable. Curse my damned brothers who were always after what was mine, but when they heard my stomach growling would try to share some of their own food. Enough with the bullshit! Treating me kindly only when it suits you. Anyone who looks down on someone else is trash, and any subhuman who has the gall to look down on their own family deserves to be held in contempt. They deserve to die. I'm not wrong. I didn't do anything wrong. You're wrong. You're the ones who pitied me and made me feel all alone. Enjoy a taste of the miserable feeling that comes with someone thinking you are the most pathetic and miserable person in the world. I can hear you laughing. You're looking at me, aren't you? You're looking at me with a sneer, aren't you? What's so funny? What about me do you find so ridiculous? Don't laugh at me, you trash. My wife didn't laugh. My first wife didn't smile no matter what. She just had a beautiful face. She just looked at me with that lovely face that she had since we were young. When I killed my family and her family and everyone who dared approach my wife and the whole time we were alone together, she never once smiled. And that was fine. I don't need my wives to smile. I never did anything to make her laugh. It's fine not to laugh. Her face was beautiful without smiling, so she didn't have to smile. Wait, why are you smiling? Stop—why did you sneer at the very last moment? Don't. Don't smirk. Don't you dare smirk at me. I'm not going to end up alone. You're my wife, so why are you sneering so pleasantly at me being alone again? Stop that! Don't pity me! Don't look down on me! I'm not the pathetic one! All of you are powerless, ignorant, and greedy! You're the pathetic ones! That pitiful greed that sends all of you scurrying and slithering here and there, frittering away your lives trying to fill the hole in your hearts! I'm different. I'm not like that. I don't want anything. In my satisfaction and fulfillment, I am far superior to all of you mired in your dissatisfaction and discontent. Even though you are all actually hopelessly jealous and envious and aspire and yearn to be like me, you're just too ashamed to admit that you can't hope to be like me. Obviously. Of course you all are. Wait, wait, wait. Stop. Don't look at me. Don't say my name. Don't talk about me. I don't care what you're saying—just stop it. Don't focus on me. Just leave me alone. I'm complete and self-contained, meaning I can live without allowing others to trample on my heart, so why do you insist on connecting with me? We can't possibly understand each other. You and I are different people. It's illogical and impossible. What's wrong with your head? It should be obvious if you think about it at all calmly. It's just that everyone other than me has some odd fever. It should be obvious enough that wanting someone else is the ultimate exercise in futility, idleness, and pointlessness. All of you constantly spouting absurdities like love and romance and friendship and trust are just ruining the mood. And reproduction is the most disgusting idea imaginable. It doesn't make any sense. What exactly is the point? A baby or a child or family or whatever word you want to use to pretty it up—they're still just one more filthy creature to deal with. What is that supposed to mean to me? Nothing. There can't be any meaning. Love can't save anyone. People are alone from the day they're born until the day they die. The idea of understanding one another is just an illusion. Life is just a stupid game of balancing the scales in an obtuse dance of consideration and compromise. It would be stupid to just let other people look down on me, so I gathered only beautiful women at my side, and I'm not fool enough to take any who would betray me, so I chose only virgins. What else does there need to be? Don't spout any of that selfish crap at me. Not after infringing on my rights this much. I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not wrong

I'm not wrong I'm not wrong I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not!

2

"Ghyaaaaaagh!"

Up and up. Cloaked in a terrible, buffeting wind, Regulus's body ascended into the night sky.

He had activated his Lion Heart the moment the attack struck his crotch, stopping time for his body and becoming invincible. As a result, the damage from the sword had been nullified—

"Gaaagh…"

Regulus's world turned a dark red as a pained croak escaped his throat.

Without Little King active, he could maintain Lion Heart for only five seconds at most. If he stopped time for his body any longer than that, there was a possibility that his heart would never beat again.

And on top of that, when he released Lion Heart, there was no avoiding the intense pain that shot through him when his heart suddenly started beating again.

It had been hundreds of years since he had experienced any pain or suffering. He couldn't help but wonder what the hell was wrong with everyone else who went through life while enduring such deprivations.

"Un…believable…"

Seething with venomous hatred, Regulus continued to fly straight up into the night sky so fast that a trail formed behind him. His body was defenseless as he reached an altitude where he could look out across the whole city.

The Water Gate City Pristella. The city of water renowned for its picturesque views—when his Gospel noted that a bride's empty seat would be filled there, he had felt blessed…

"How can something this absurd happeeeeen?!"

Losing all the brides he had put so much effort into gathering, even having his very status as Archbishop of Greed threatened, getting berated by an uppity brat who was nothing but talk, being pitied by the disgraceful wench he had chosen at first sight.

There was no greater disgrace. He had never experienced such humiliation before. The whole reason he had been an Archbishop was because he didn’t want to deal with such frustrations.

So why had he been forced to endure such persecution?

“Grrrrrrrrrrrgh…”

All thoughts of holding back had gone out the window. This was the limit of his mercy. It didn’t matter that that boy had figured out Lion Heart or that some Sword Saint had showed up again.

Even with only five seconds, if he was invincible, there were any number of ways he could kill them all. The only thing that had stopped him was that he didn’t enjoy seeing scenes of despair and the echoes of death cries, so he had chosen to abstain. That was all.

With Lion Heart active, Regulus could ignore all the rules of the world if he wanted to. If he used that method, then any being chained down by such concepts couldn’t begin to match him.

Using his ability for a brief second was enough to cast whatever he could get his hands on, raining destruction on the entire city. There were other Archbishops in the city, but whether they lived or died meant nothing to him. There could be nothing more important and pressing than escaping the humiliation he was currently experiencing in that exact moment. Nothing more important than transforming those idiots’ joyous celebrations of victory into fear and terror.

The moment his absurd ascent finally stopped, he would be able to use the dirt he had picked up on the ground and end them all. Until then, they could enjoy their false victory—

“—Agh?!”

As Regulus continued his resentful intonations, he suddenly croaked as something struck his back.

Regulus’s ascent was suddenly stopped in midair, pinning him in the sky. It almost felt like someone above him had pressed a foot into his back.

“Ordinarily in a duel, I would have sheathed my blade once my opponent had lost the will to fight.”

A calm and composed male voice rang in Regulus’s ears.

“

even leaped from the ground onto the back of a dragon flying above the clouds before."

"M-monster…!"

"That's right. I am a monster who hunts monsters—and it is high time you accepted your fate."

Reinhard removed his foot from Regulus's back.

The next moment, Regulus's survival instincts screamed out for the very first time. It was a feeling he had never once experienced in a hundred some odd years of serving as an Archbishop.

Sensing impending death, he activated Lion Heart at the same moment the attack came.

Reinhard unleashed a lightning-like knife hand strike right into the middle of Regulus's back. It was a strike that could cut cleaner than most famous blades, but it had no effect against Lion Heart. But the force of the blow still sent Regulus hurtling toward the ground at breakneck speed.

"Ooohhaaaaaaahh!"

Regulus smashed face-first into the ground that sprang into view. But the effects of Lion Heart were still active, so his body slipped into the ground like it was being swallowed up by water.

He passed straight through the stone pavement, and breaking through that hard stone layer, he descended into the earth itself. As he continued underground, receiving no resistance from the ground, Regulus had a sudden realization.

He had no way of stopping the speed of his descent.

Ordinarily, Regulus would stop the time of the things that he touched, controlling his power naturally so as not to destroy them with his own body. But now that he didn't have Little King active and had to consciously control Lion Heart's effects, it was extraordinarily difficult to manipulate things beyond his own body.

If he didn't stop his momentum, his body would keep falling forever, eventually reaching the bottom of the earth itself. What would happen after that?

He had honestly never thought about whether there even was a bottom to the ground before, but there was the great waterfall at the edge of the world. So if there was a limit to the land horizontally, then it stood to reason that there was a vertical limit as well.

If so, would he end up going flying into the unknown beyond where the great waterfall emptied out?

"There's no way…I would allow…?!"

As Regulus choked from the literally bottomless fear, his heart reached its limit.

Five seconds had passed since it stopped. Alarms rang in his mind as Regulus struggled with how to react.

He had never stopped his time for more than five seconds while his heart was inside him before. What was the longest he could go? Ten would be impossible. And the longer he waited, the farther his deep dive would continue.

But what would happen if he released his power while passing through the ground at high speed?

This is not the time to worry about it. There is nothing more foolish than just allowing myself to die because my heart stopped.

"Ughhhh, ugghhhhhhh, ugghhhhhh!"

Gritting his chattering teeth, Regulus made his decision.

Pressing his hand to his chest as his heart pleaded to beat again, Regulus released Lion Heart, undoing his invincibility, returning his body and the laws of physics to their natural states—

"Bghhhhh?!"

Every bone in his body shattered.

Or at least the merciless force that crashed into his body was so powerful that it felt that way.

It made perfect sense. He had crashed into the ground at a speed far beyond what could be achieved by simply falling, and he had gone into the earth without losing any of that momentum. The only reason he avoided his body instantaneously turning into a puddle was because his limbs had been splayed out while passing through the ground before he released his power.

"Ahhh, aghhh…"

Letting out a hollow groan, blood and tears flowed from his crushed eyes. The shock of impact had shot through Regulus's entire body, mashing everything.

Quite literally, every single bone in his body had shattered, and his organs were all badly damaged. His previously unblemished white hair was marred by blood and mud, while his crushed lower body was stained by urine and feces.

All that remained was a mass of meat that was vaguely human in shape.

But amazingly, this misshapen lump was still breathing.

"Ooo…ahhh…"

It was a terrifying level of attachment to life—no, it would be better to call it a grudge.

He did not hold on because he wished to live. All that remained within him was a resentment toward the living who stood above his head. Even at this point, what drove him was hollow vanity.

It was the simple thought of, *If I had been serious, you wouldn't have stood a chance.*

"Eegh…uuugh…"

But that obsession was not something to make light of.

He had spent his entire life on the singular goal of never allowing anyone to pity him. The resolve that he had honed and readied for over a hundred years didn't fail or falter as he made the best possible choice for his own survival.

"Ugh, ergh."

He used Lion Heart in short bursts—five seconds at a time, Regulus dug barehanded through the ground, beginning the long, arduous process of returning to the surface.

During the five seconds it was active, all pain left his body. Once it was over, the living hell would return. He continued to experience the miserable suffering and heavenly release from pain in five-second intervals, over and over and over again.

And as he experienced them, what dominated Regulus's mind was his crazed obsession with the scum above him. He was certain those maggots on the surface were patting themselves on the back for defeating him.

He couldn't forgive that. He couldn't allow it.

To be made light of…to be looked down on…to be pitied…was the most unbearable suffering. Slandering his person while he was still alive was unforgivable, but slandering him after death was even worse. He should have just ended it quickly. The people he had seen and the ones he had not seen, too. If he just killed everyone, no one would be able to say anything about him. He should have just done that from the start. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Once he got up there, he would kill those three, and then he would kill every last person. Kill them all.

"Gh."

He took pleasure imagining them pleading for their lives once he got back to the surface and they realized what he was capable of when he got serious. Particularly that woman who had insisted on making a fool of him at every turn. He had to humiliate her on every level before he would be satisfied.

The woman who was to be his seventy-ninth wife. In the first place, that elf woman in that desolate forest who had been originally intended to take that number and that detestable Petelgeuse—

to be water.

Water. It was water. The moment he realized it was water, Regulus noticed just how dry his throat was. A single drop was not enough. He wanted enough water to soothe his throat, to fill his stomach. Without the effect of Lion Heart, time continued passing for his body, and for the first time in over a hundred years, he wanted to eat something in order to fill his empty stomach.

Even just water would be enough. That would be the most immaculate thing right now.

Immediately after thinking that, just as he wished, water began trickling down from overhead.

"Ha-ha-ha."

He licked at the water that tasted of dirt. Even with his teeth gone, his tongue shredded, and blood flowing from cuts that covered the inside of his mouth, Regulus could appreciate just how delicious the water was. It almost felt like he was being fulfilled.

—The moment after he felt that satisfaction was the moment that the flow of water increased all at once, sending his body back down to the bottom of the tunnel he had excavated.

"Aah, ugh. Oooh?!"

It flowed in. It didn't stop. With nowhere to go, water poured endlessly into the tunnel.

The bottom of the ground, surrounded by hard rock with no room to spare. In no time, Regulus's body sunk into the muddy water, and he could no longer move.

—Regulus didn't understand at all what had happened.

This water was coming from the great canal of Pristella far above his head.

Because of Reinhard's attack, Regulus had passed through the stone pavement and into the ground. The path his body had carved into the ground was being filled with water pouring out from the waterway he himself had destroyed earlier. That water was now pouring without pause into the hole his body had made, sinking him back down.

Almost as if the water was a manifestation of the city's rage at having its beautiful cityscape so devastated.

"Glug."

Of course, Regulus would never know that fact as he drowned.

As the water assaulted him, and terrified by the pressure of the liquid flooding his lungs, he desperately tried to escape. But there was no room to flail in the small passage underground, so all he could do was curl up in the dirty mud and try to preserve his life using Lion Heart.

While it was active, he wouldn't have to experience the pain of struggling to breathe. And it was only during those moments that he could be free of the pain of his shattered body.

But the effect wouldn't continue for more than five seconds.

Feeling the limits of his heart, Regulus was drawn back into the watery torment by fear of death.

And so he alternated between the embraces of two kinds of death.

He couldn't choose either. He had to escape both somehow. But Regulus didn't have a way to do that. All he had were complaints and grudges.

He could activate Lion Heart as many times as he wanted, but he didn't have something that would help him keep breathing. And it was necessary to wait a few seconds before activating Lion Heart again.

Death was drawing near. As he continued to alternate between momentary invincibility and impending mortality, death gradually grew closer and closer.

Time stop. Dying. Time stop. Dying. Time stop… Dying…

Unending pain and suffering that felt like it would last forever.

Regulus opened his mouth. Water and mud flowed in. It filled his lungs and body as he shouted. He raised a voiceless scream.

It was not a name. He didn't have anyone's name to scream with his dying breath.

There was no response. No one was at his side. He was alone in his final moment.

But even so, he shouted. It was filled with a grudge that would see everyone else in the world die if only he could see it to fruition.

He didn't want anyone around to ridicule him after he was gone.

He didn't want that girl to merrily celebrate getting revenge for her mother or Petelgeuse.

He was sick just imagining her joyous dance at his death.

She would surely act like she had just achieved some great life goal.

As if her life would be set into motion by Regulus's death. As if she could shine now.

Regulus couldn't bear the thought of her grossly illogical, misplaced, and misdirected joy, of her saying some nonsense about how she could continue with her life, that she could be content now that he was dead.

He couldn't bear the thought that his death would have so great an influence on her—

3

Regulus Corneas broke through the stone pavement and sank into the ground.

The city of water provided the filler that flowed endlessly into the grave his body had made for him.

It was unclear whether he was still alive or dead, but the effect of Lion Heart couldn't last for long. It would give out at some point, and his body would be squashed. Moreover, the only way out he had left was rapidly filling with water.

The villain who had drowned himself in his powerful ability would meet his end drowning in the counterattack mounted by the city he had ruined so much of.

"…Emilia-tan, you don't look too relieved."

Standing in front of Regulus's grave, Emilia was looking down the hole with a long face. Subaru was a bit concerned by the faint anguish he could make out in her expression.

There was not a single part of that madman worthy of even the slightest bit of sympathy. Emilia surely agreed on that point, so there should have been no reason for her to be troubled over his end deep underground.

"Your kindness is one of your virtues, but I think it would be a mistake to feel any sympathy for him. There are people in the world who just aren't worth feeling bad for."

"…Thank you for worrying about me. But it's not that."

Emilia shook her head slowly. She was silent for a few moments as she closed her eyes.

"About Regulus… The first time I saw him, I felt like I had met him somewhere before."

"You did? When was that?"

"That's the thing—I can't remember."

Emilia cocked her head.

—Ironically, that happened at the same moment as Regulus screamed out far belowground.

His final cry praying that Emilia does not feel joy at his death. Hoping that she would simply forget him, the being who had been so involved with her mother's death and her benefactor's transformation. His absolute desire to not have her feel some sense of fulfillment with her life because of his death.

His final wish that couldn't reach the people standing aboveground—

"Where did I meet Regulus before?"

Regulus Corneas didn't leave a single mark on Emilia.

Ironically, his final wish came true.

4

A bright white light.

A warm, gentle, and reassuring light.

How long has it been since I felt so tranquil greeting the morning?

I was always so melancholic when I awoke. Trapped on all sides by the gloom of a waking nightmare that never ended and with no hope of relief.

I was so sure that darkness would persist for all eternity.

Is that why the light feels so dear, so heartwarming?

"—ake up."

A voice.

Someone calling me from beyond the white light.

Guided by that voice, feeling almost like a child being led along by my parents, I left the darkness.

The white light in the distance grew until it was all I could see—

"

5

The pale-blue light frayed and melted away as the barrier of ice lost its shape.

The ice that encapsulated the half-destroyed chapel dissolved into particles of light, the mana scattering only to be embraced by the dancing lesser spirits before disappearing like fleeting raindrops.

It wouldn't be odd for anyone to be moved to tears by the beauty of the scene, but that was probably not the only reason why all the women were hugging one another and weeping.

They had finally been freed from the nightmare that had tied them down, consuming some of the most important years of their lives.

"My Emilia-tan really is amazing."

Subaru's lips broke into a smile as he murmured in admiration.

He was looking at Emilia and the wives—former wives who were hugging her in tears. There were exactly fifty-three of them, all in dresses fit for a wedding. Not a single one had been lost.

Despite Subaru's worst fears, Emilia had miraculously managed to pull off the impossible.

"…I never would have been able to figure out something like this on my own. When I heard he was merging his heart with theirs, I was sure there was no way to get around it without their deaths."

Killing them and dragging the little king naked and screaming from his throne. Subaru had been determined to do it, believing that Regulus couldn't be stopped without that sacrifice.

He had stopped looking for alternative answers. Even if he had been trying so desperately to stall for time against Regulus. But in his stead, Emilia had kept poring over the cards she had to play, looking for a better solution.

And that was how she had come to this.

"You really stole the whole show this time."

"Hee-hee, that's not true at all."

Hearing that comment, Emilia came over to where Subaru was slumped over in the corner of the chapel. Her white dress was ripped and torn, and her silver hair was a mess after their life-and-death struggle. But even so, she was absolutely radiant, with a look of accomplishment on her face after making it through a hard fight.

"So cute…"

"Really? I'm such a mess right now, though…"

"There's a charm to this, too. You're the kind of heroine who fights and gets her hands dirty, so it's only natural that you would look good after battle. But you are also the sort of heroine who is a symbol of daily life and needs to be protected, so when you smile at me, you're cute then, too. Basically, you are always cute."

"Sorry, I don't really understand what you're saying at all."

Emilia grimaced wryly as Subaru cracked jokes easily now that the fighting was over. Subaru looked over at the freed ex-wives assembling behind Emilia.

"Is this okay? They look like they haven't finished giving you their thanks yet."

"Don't tease me… I can't act high-and-mighty with them. I'm grateful it worked out in the moment, but I still forced them to make such a dangerous choice."

"But no one died. They're all still alive. And that's what matters."

That was truly what was most important.

"When it comes to that, I wasn't any help at all. All I was doing was running for dear life the whole time."

"There you go again. That's a *really* bad habit of yours."

Emilia put her hands on her hips, glaring reproachfully at Subaru for his self-deprecation. She looked at the wounds covering his body, particularly his right leg now wrapped in bandages.

"You're battered and bruised and pushed yourself beyond all reason… If you hadn't done all you did, everyone would be in a very bad place right now. You're the one who figured out Regulus's weak point, aren't you?"

"The last piece of the puzzle was you, though. You were really amazing, figuring out that this would work. To think you could put them all in a deep freeze to temporarily stop their hearts."

"That's because I've spent a long time frozen myself."

Emilia stuck out her tongue bashfully.

So cute.

It was definitely not the sort of thing that could just be papered over with an adorable gesture, but Emilia's quick wit had guided them to total victory over Regulus. There were a lot of things that had not gone to waste. Both Emilia's past encased in ice and Subaru's memories of all the times he had been punished by the Witch's penalty for breaking the taboo.

—Almost like it was all foreshadowing that taught us how to defeat

Regulus.

“

had turned to bloody red mist.

Him asking Subaru to ensure the safety of Emilia and the former wives before leaving had been consideration for the fact that Subaru didn't have the strength left to go with him.

So all in all, Subaru wasn't particularly concerned about Reinhard.

"You don't have to worry about him. Apparently, even if he leaves things be, the lesser spirits just heal his wounds for him without him even asking, or at least that's what he said."

"Right. All the lesser spirits around us who weren't contracted with me all followed him… Reinhard might have the aptitude to be a spirit master."

"Let's drop it there! I'm going to lose what few unique traits I have left at this rate."

"Really? I think it would be nice to match, like friends…"

That was a cute way of thinking about it, but that would also mean being friendly with Julius, and Subaru would rather not have to deal with that scenario. And in Reinhard's case, he was already easily the strongest in the world without even borrowing the strength of spirits.

Crashing the unstoppable force Reinhard into the immovable object Regulus had been the crux of Subaru's plan, but even he couldn't help but reel in slack-jawed awe at Reinhard's one-man superhuman highlight reel, including what sounded suspiciously like kicking off the moon to come flying back to earth.

Honestly, he seemed like he belonged to some entirely different plane of existence, but as knights for two different royal candidates, he and Reinhard were supposedly in the same position.

"Emilia-tan, I know I'm super weak, but please don't abandon me."

"—? I *really* count on you a lot, though?"

"Right?! Right! I'll pour my whole heart and soul into supporting you from now on, too!"

"Wh-what was that all of a sudden? I never really doubted you, but I guess let's keep doing our best together…?"

Subaru was grateful for Emilia, who kindly accepted him even as she was confused by his sudden mood swings, bringing him from the depths of depression to merry excitement.

Still, though, no need to compare myself to other people. Relying on what other people think like that is just a path to becoming the same as

Regulus. And he was the sort of guy who couldn't be sure of where he stood without looking down at the ground below him.

He was the absolute worst sort of person with exactly zero redeeming qualities, but he was at least a good example of what not *to be. That still doesn't mean there's anything worth learning from him, though.*

"…I wonder if everyone else is all right," Emilia said with a worried expression.

"That's what Reinhard is for. And honestly, they're all stronger than I am anyway."

Subaru's response could be interpreted uncharitably as a *just leave that stuff to everyone else* kind of fatalism, but the best way to describe it was that he trusted them.

They were all different factions, and they would end up clashing with one another later when it came down to determining who would be the next ruler, but Subaru believed in them fully.

Whether it was because of their character, their abilities, or their convictions, the ultimate reason was something far simpler than all of that. It was because he liked the people he was fighting alongside. That was why he wanted to believe that they wouldn't lose to a menace like the Witch Cult.

"

"I'm sure it will be okay. After all, everyone is *way* stronger, *way* smarter, and are always doing *so much* more than I can."

Emilia was choosing her words carefully, as if trying to put Subaru at ease. Her choice of words was exactly what he expected from this kind girl at a moment like this, and it made Subaru's heart feel just a bit lighter.

Have faith in them. Have faith in the comrades I trusted to deal with the other Archbishops. And have faith in Reinhard, who went to help them.

He wanted to make it to morning without anyone going missing.

If they could do that, then it would be one less thing for Subaru to worry about—

"

them so familiarly, when two uninvited guests interrupted a wedding going forward without the bride's consent, when the canals of the Water Gate City were enveloped by a white blaze—

—and also when an invader broke into city hall filled with noncombatants.

"*Bump-bada-bum!* Time for me to take the stage!"

A loud, shrill laugh filled the room.

The earsplitting trill came from an adorable young girl with bright, shoulder-length blond hair and gleaming red eyes. She looked charming, but she was wearing torn rags that barely covered anything in order to flaunt her body, leading any sane person to react in revulsion.

And most likely, that was the exact goal of Capella Emerada Lugunica, Archbishop of Lust and a monster who spat on everyone else's thoughts.

And Capella's sadistic gaze was turned to—

"You're the Archbishop of Lust…!"

A slender figure with flaxen-colored cat ears stood across from Capella, voice quivering with rage. Gripping a short sword in both hands, this brave person pointed the tip of the blade at Capella in the doorway.

It was Ferris, his body covered in blood and his yellow eyes filled with a tense emotion.

"What's this?" Capella cocked her head. "What, were you left behind in a place like this? Isn't this the moment where everyone is supposed to join forces? 'Deliver a righteous blow to those evil cultists controlling the city!' and all that? And yet, they left you here? That can't be good, can it? Isn't that right, everyone?!"

"—Yeah! That's right! We'll all join forces and protect this city!"

"We'll reclaim our city, reclaim our beautiful home with our own two hands!"

"There's no way we can lose with justice on our side!"

"Justice shall triumph, and evil shall get what it deserves! Victory shall be ours!"

In response to Capella's screechy question, a gallant young man's voice answered. And then the brave voice of a young girl, followed by a rugged, booming voice of a man who sounded like he had experienced countless battles, and then the voice of what sounded like a learned woman in the prime of her life urging people to take up arms.

Each and every voice was imbued with a strength of will and resolve befitting their words. However, they all came from the same mouth.

"Isn't this supposed to be that cool kind of story development?"

And from the same lips that had spoken those impassioned words came a sneering, scornful voice dripping with a malice that betrayed all those emotions.

Having transformed herself freely to match all the different voices, Capella returned to her former girlish figure, shuddering detestably as she hugged her slender shoulders.

"That's…Lust's power…"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! Could I ask you not to look at me with such excitement in your eyes? You don't have to be greedy! My love is indiscriminate, even for a bitch like you! Whatever form of love you…oh?"

Capella cut herself off, her crimson eyes narrowing with a deep interest. Her gaze went past Ferris, to the person he was desperate to protect and the reason why he had picked up the sword.

The long-haired woman lying down on the bed was worth as much as life itself to Ferris.

The room that Capella had broken into was where Crusch was recuperating, still enduring the pain of terrible wounds that resisted all attempts to heal after an earlier battle.

Looking at the bed behind Ferris, Capella sighed half-heartedly.

"I see—so she lost against the blood. Well, I figured it was probably hopeless, but still it's disappointing to have the failure confirmed. She should have had pretty noble blood, too, it looked like."

"Silence! Why did you do such a thing to Lady Crusch?! How can she be healed?!"

Ferris exploded in fury when Capella sighed more out of boredom than disappointment this time. Ferris held his short sword in front of him, his lovely face warped by uncontrolled rage.

Beautifully adorned and engraved with a lion's crest, the blade was more ceremonial than fit for combat. Combined with Ferris's own lack of skill at fighting, it unfortunately looked like little more than a toy in his hands.

“Screaming and shouting while flailing that little plaything around is a waste of such a cute face…huh?”

Capella grinned with her tongue sticking out, but she suddenly furrowed her brow.

“Ugh, nasty. Huh? What’s with that unnatural body of yours? A man with a body like that… How much have you tinkered with your body? I’m genuinely speechless.”

“—!”

“Is it to get men to let their guard down? If so, then you have quite the understanding of just how worthless the animals called people really are. That’s right—men are stupid, women are scum, and everyone’s a lowlife… That’s certainly a theory I could happily endorse.”

“Quiet! Just answer my question! What did you do to Lady Crusch?!”

“Agh, this is such a pain.”

Enduring his shame, Ferris shouted again. But Capella just shrugged, and an instant later, her face melted away.

Ferris gasped as Capella’s form folded in on itself and twisted this way and that. In the blink of an eye, what emerged was—

“Agh…”

“Did something surprise you?”

The face of the person Ferris most loved appeared, running her hand through her long green hair.

Capella had taken on the appearance of Ferris’s beloved master. The blood drained from his face, and the sword in his hands quivered slightly.

“See, someone you hate is suddenly identical to someone you love, and now look at you. I have this face, this body, this voice, but inside it’s still little ole me.”

Capella slowly stepped forward, smiling with Crusch’s face.

She walked close enough that Ferris could feel her breath, lining up her chest right with the edge of the trembling blade that Ferris held out—Crusch’s figure was pressing up against the sword point.

“Your hated enemy is before your eyes. Please take vengeance for me. It hurts—it hurts, please… See, your master is telling you to do it.”

She was so close that Ferris could pierce her heart with a simple thrust. The posture and that voice… It was so achingly familiar, but it was taunting Ferris, tearing at his heart.

“Haaah, haaah.”

He started breathing faster. His gaze grew unfocused. It was a priceless opportunity. If he could only push forward with the sword, he could cut out her heart. He could get vengeance for his master.

The only problem was that the enemy looked exactly like his beloved master now.

“Do it, do it, do it, do it, do it.”

“

deeply carved into her breast vanished without a trace, and her expression immediately returned to normal as she shrugged casually.

“Yep, if I’m going to do this, I really have to do it with the proper preparation for it to mean anything. A master and retainer who love each other being forced to kill each other… There’s such a great profanity of love in that story, but…my mistake, I guess.”

“What were you trying to accomplish with this farce?! What did you want to happen?!”

“Nothing in particular, really. There wasn’t some grand plan or anything. Just a way to kill some time, like convincing a husband to murder his own wife. And I just thought a master making her knight cross-dress is a pretty perverted sort of hobby is all.”

“Don’t mistake our shared promise for something so superficial!”

“Calling sexual love and proclivities superficial sounds pretty thoughtless if you ask me.”

Capella cocked her head at Ferris’s ragged shouts. And then she held up her right hand. It changed shape dramatically. Her palm became almost like a giant flower with her fingers growing into long tentacles. She knocked Ferris aside with them, slamming him into the wall.

“Gah…”

“A weak-ass little body. True to appearance, huh? If you really want to be a woman that badly, then shall I make you one? I can make whatever additions or subtractions you might want.”

“My…body doesn’t matter… Heal Lady Crusch…”

“Booooring. Could you spare me the whole *there are people more important than me* lip service? And of all things, you want me to heal the body of someone who lost to the blood? If anything, that’s what I wanted to know, too.”

“Gyaaaah!”

The twisting tentacles bound Ferris’s arms and legs, tightening sharply around his slender body. Capella watched with pleasure as Ferris groaned in pain as his bones creaked from the intense pressure.

“Now then, parting is such sweet sorrow, but I’m afraid I can’t be hanging around too long. I have to go looking for some important little collectibles. They should be…”

“—less.”

Suddenly something other than a cry passed Ferris's lips. Hearing that, Capella cocked an eyebrow and brought her ear close to his lips, suddenly deeply interested.

"What—what? Begging for your life? What final words did you have for me?"

"You useless…"

Hatred glowed in his yellow eyes as he spat those words at Capella.

The next moment, the tentacle binding Ferris's body exploded, and the flower's color faded as it rotted away. Watching her right arm rot away, Capella looked at the ruined appendage in genuine confusion.

"What's this? What did you do to my hand…?"

"The short version is that you don't have a monopoly on being nasty."

Ferris's body was freed as the tentacle withered away. Capella continued to look in confusion when another voice interrupted her—and then there was a flash of light that hit Capella right in the face.

"Gah…"

A stream of energy erupted, and the temperature in the room seemed to rocket upward. Taking the brunt of the blast right in the face, the right half of her head was scorched.

The smell of burned flesh filled the room, and a gaping, ashy wound opened as Capella was knocked backward. Licking the wound with a long, snakelike tongue, the monster grinned.

"Buhe, eb'n 'ough it 'as one of 'our 'om'ades'…even though it was your own comrade's face, you didn't hold back at all."

Her scorched face re-formed as she was talking, her speech unnaturally recovering partway through. Ignoring any pain she might have felt, Capella's eyes flashed as she looked at the bed in the back of the room.

The long-haired woman who was supposed to be lying there unconscious pointed her palm at Capella—

"I was about to wonder if maybe she hadn't lost to the blood, but who the hell are you?"

"You're awfully pompous for an uninvited guest. If you're gonna ask like that, though, then—"

The woman who had been lying in bed in Crusch Karsten's place smiled elegantly as her long wavy hair fell down her back.

"I'm Anastasia Hoshin. The proxy representative for this city at the moment."

"Well, you're awfully cruel, aren't you? Burning your own friend's face? And without even a moment of hesitation."

Anastasia puffed out her chest as Capella touched her entirely restored face. This time her face was not that of Crusch but her original face.

"We're not friends." Anastasia shook her head. "We're business rivals…or rather, competitors. I ain't gonna hold back just 'cause you decided to copy her face for a hot moment."

"So then aiming for the face was just venting your spleen a bit at your future enemy?"

"I don't mix business and private matters. I just aimed for the head 'cause I hoped you might die if I crushed it is all."

Capella's head had been almost completely blown away, but that was hardly enough to kill her. Anastasia sighed when she saw that Capella was indeed alive and well.

"I had my hopes up, but unfortunately it looks like that didn't do it."

"You're pretty extreme! Burning away a woman's face without hesitation? That hyper-logical selfishness! You're truly a rotten mass of female flesh after my own heart!"

"I can't say I'm all that happy with your favor. I prefer the attentions of the furry and fluffy types."

Anastasia's calm didn't crack even in the face of Capella's insulting speech. Her response to an Archbishop's over-the-top commentary and actions was not that different from how she would deal with a rude and vicious customer.

"It sure feels like you were lying in wait for me. Even though you shouldn't have had any reason to think I was coming."

"—? What are you talking about? You heard Natsuki's performance, right? I was sure you would come if you heard that. Since your personality is the absolute worst."

"Heh."

"To win as a merchant means not letting your opponent do what they want while also managing to do what you want. I just applied the same idea to fighting."

And she had believed that Lust, out of all the Archbishops in the city, was particularly prone to that sort of reaction.

With that analysis in hand, Anastasia had set a trap and waited for Capella to attack city hall. Naturally, the real Crusch and the other wounded people had been moved to a different shelter for the time being.

The only ones left in the building were Ferris and Anastasia in that room, and—

“Everyone else is so upstanding, so it turned out that Princess and I were maybe the only ones who noticed.”

“So since your head actually works, you stayed back and waited for me…and you were right on the money. But are you maybe looking down on me a bit too much, little lady? Neither that kitten over there nor you look like you’ve really got what it takes to tangle with me.”

“Aw, you’re going to make me blush. Despite how it looks, I am a bit on the older side, you know?”

Anastasia put her hand to her cheek as Capella licked her lips. Her mouth curled as she felt a twinge of suspicion at how confident Anastasia was behaving.

“I wonder if you’ll still look that composed when you’re a worm from the neck down? Why don’t we find out?”

“That sounds scary… Maybe we could use a little space.”

“

Ignoring all concepts like mortal wounds or anything of the sort, Capella just burst into laughter at the surprising result. Lying in wait, burning her face, dropping her down a long shaft to splatter against the ground. Despite enduring all that, there seemed to be a genuine pleasure and excitement in her laughter.

It was a damp, dark, cold room. It was less like a basement and more like the sewer network strung out under the city. An access point for inspections or something like that.

Hearing the sound of flowing water from nearby and feeling a breeze blowing across her body, Capella looked up at the ceiling to the point high above where she had been dropped from.

"Such an intense welcome. It's almost enough to set a fire underneath my freely sized breasts. I'll have to get back quick and hold you oh so close. I'll train you nice and sweet, so you won't be able to love anyone other than me…"

"You ain't goin' back."

Someone else spoke as Capella's cheeks reddened, and she quivered in excitement.

It was a low, husky, listless man's voice. Capella spun around and saw someone emerge from the darkness. An intense look of disgust crossed her face.

"My aesthetics won't let me hold back against someone who tries to hide their own hideousness."

"That so? Don't worry—my aesthetics aren't really interested in holding back against you, either."

He sighed as if just looking at Capella was making him depressed. "You heard up there, right? Our own nasty group saw right through you. We almost knew what you were going to do before you did. And when it comes to nastiness, there isn't anyone who can beat my princess."

The solemn sound of a sword slowly being drawn from its sheath echoed in the basement as he said that. The curved sword slipped free of its bindings, dimly reflecting his figure in the murky shadows.

A one-armed man stood there. A figure in a black helm. A foreigner with an odd appearance. He pointed the Liuyedao toward Capella—

"We just met, but unfortunately, I'm in a bad mood today, so get your ass out of here before I die, damn mollusk."

AFTERWORD

Now that I've reached the familiar portion of the page for these afterwords, allow me to turn to the customary thanks.

To my editor I, even though the schedule this time was even tighter than the last book and even though it looked bleak with both of us getting the flu, thank you for all your work. Let's be sure to get the flu vaccine on time next year! Seriously!

To the illustrator Otsuka, thank you so much for the detailed and wonderful illustrations of Priscilla's new outfit and Emilia's bridal dress along with everything else! The cover with Priscilla's complete confidence and Liliana's easygoing looks was terrifically well done!

To the designer Kusano, I'm in awe of how beautifully you created such an intense and powerful page!

In *Gekkan Comic Alive*, Matsuse's third arc is reaching its finale. It goes beautifully with Tsubata Nozaki's *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*, and I can't look away from either!

To everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial department, all the proofreaders, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work as always!

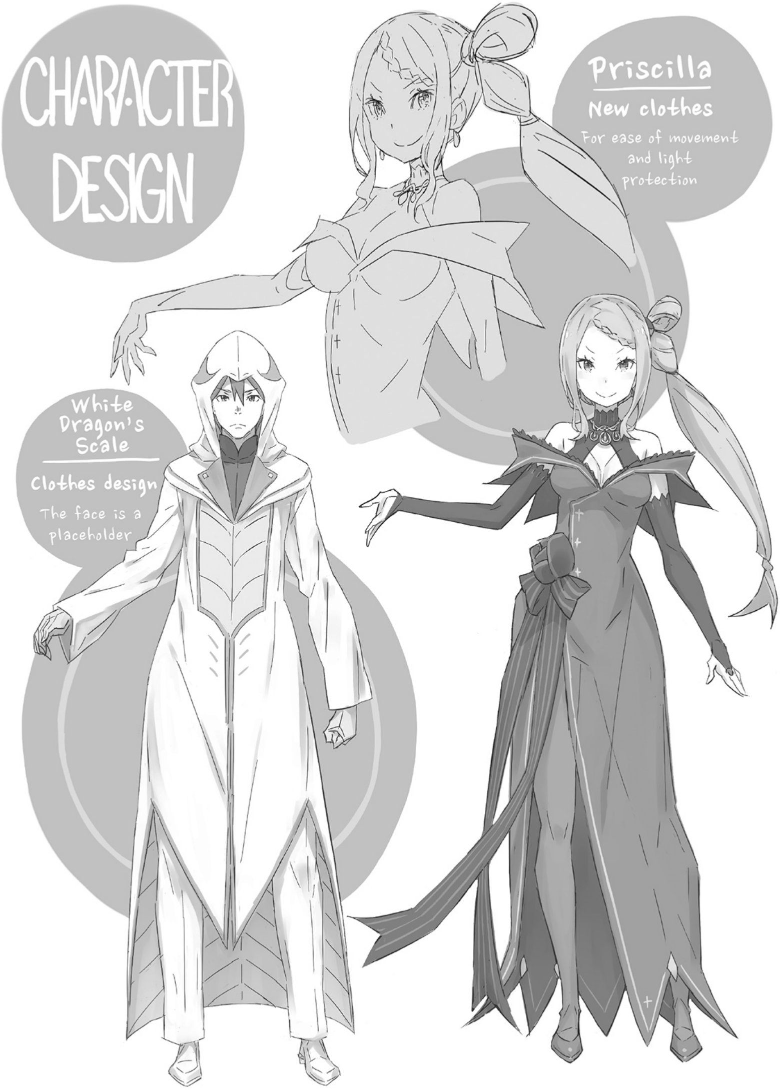
And finally, my deepest gratitude to all the readers who continue to support this series.

Because of your support, *Re:ZERO* was able to get a second anime. Thank you so, so much for allowing me the opportunity to have the dream of my work being made into an anime come true for a second time!

Let's meet again in Volume 20! Be well!

March 2019

<Head spinning at how busy 2019 will be, too>


CHARACTER DESIGN
Priscilla
New clothes
For ease of movement and light protection
White Dragon's Scale
Clothes design
The face is a placeholder

Liliana
Priscilla

"Lady Priscilla! Lady Priscilla! Th-th-th-this is b-b-bad!"

"What? Do not fret so, Songstress. There is no reason to heedlessly strain your throat. It is capable of singing songs that can move even me, so you should use it for nothing else."

"This isn't the time for that, Lady Priscilla! Big news! *R-R-R-Re:ZERO* is getting another anime!"

"Oh-ho—I was wondering what could cause such a commotion, but that is rather good news."

"It's way bigger than that! I mean, with how the first anime ended, how are they going to top that?"

"Obviously, it will be the story that has yet to be animated. I suppose a commoner remains a commoner, even if they become a tad more constructive… There's no reason to get up in arms when the masses simply point and laugh at you."

"R-right, you don't hold back, do you, Lady Priscilla…? But! But—but! The truth is there is another announcement! *Dun-da-da-dun!*"

"Hmm, very well, I'll listen. Speak."

"Aye! The second OVA, *The Frozen Bond*, is going to be showing in theaters and has been confirmed for fall 2019!"

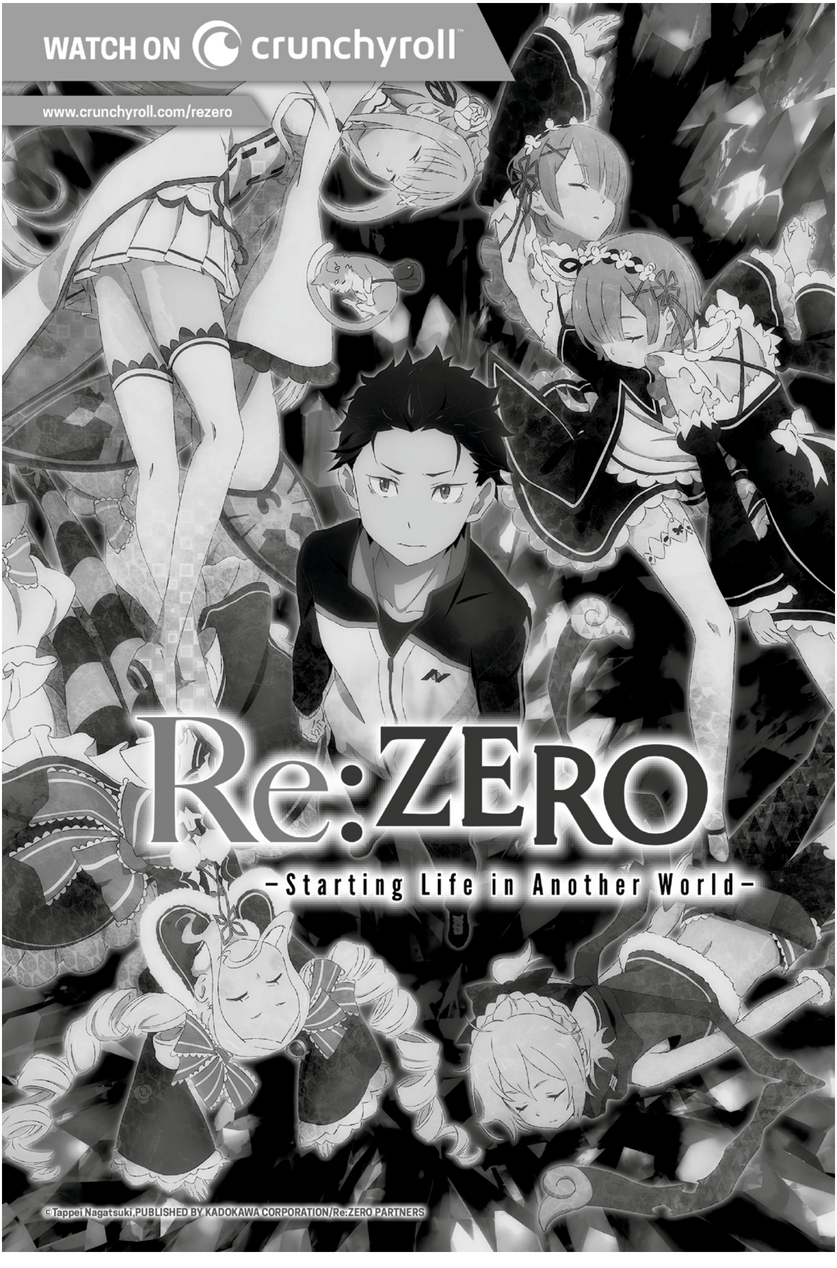
"Ah, that was the story of the half-demon and her mangy-looking cat companion, was it not? Utterly uninteresting to me, but it would not be a terrible idea to watch that leading up to the second anime."

"Right! And speaking of anime connections, you can't forget about *Isekai Quartet*, Lady Priscilla!"

"*Isekai Quartet*…? What is that odd-sounding name that grates on the ears? Do you have a death wish?"

“Wait, what?! No, not at all! It’s a crossover between *Re:ZERO*, *Overlord*, *The Saga of Tanya the Evil*, and *Konosuba: God’s Blessing on This Wonderful World*! It will be airing starting in April—but only if that pleases you, of course, Lady Priscilla.”

“



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Re:ZERO
-Starting Life in Another World-

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